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He Shared Ellen With Her Husband

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# ALL THAT LOVE ALLOWS

**PAUL DARCY BOLES**

Author of "The Streak"

(THE BEGGARS  
IN THE SUN)



Complete and  
Unabridged

"A love story double-edged."  
Arkansas GAZETTE



# NO TURNING BACK

The bed was soft. I petted her and smoothed her. Women like that get in your blood. They can drive you wild if they have any bitch in them. I figured Ellen didn't. Well anyhow here I am in love with my wife and Ellen, too. No turning back now . . .

I thought what a funny world it is, and how just an hour ago I had come out to this big, fine estate to buy a dog, and instead met Ellen. Now we're caught on a merry-go-round of sensation and there'll be no brass ring at the end of the ride.

*"A wonderfully human book, with excellent characterization and development. It holds up to the climax, with two particular qualities predominant—vitality and innate decency."*

BOSTON HERALD

## A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Darcy Boles was born in Auburn, Indiana. He went to school in Gary and Hobart, Indiana. He has traveled through most of Europe and has worked with radio stations in Muskegon, Grand Rapids and Chicago. He is now working with an advertising agency in Atlanta. His hobbies include automobiles, music, gardening, swimming, boxing and painting. **THE BEGGARS IN THE SUN** is his second novel, his first being a novel entitled **THE STREAK**.



## FROM THE REVIEWS

"It is impossible to register an adverse opinion because there is so much superb, moving writing in it, and because the characters are all quite believable, in themselves. . . It is an idyllic piece of work, full of rich images, and heavily laden with a feel for the town and the region in which it is set."

*Birmingham NEWS*

"This is the story of Carp Rambo who . . . tells his own story in the same relaxed manner that marks his singing. We follow him through spring, summer and fall, through the town and the swamp, through a love affair and a robbery . . . This is good reading, well put together and hard to lay down."

*Fort Lauderdale NEWS*

"A rather moving, somewhat tense and well-motivated story. . . The story, like Carp himself, is both simple and subtle . . . the characters develop well out of Carp's telling. The author's knowledge of the South and his feeling for its people appear to be extensive."

*New York TIMES*



A NOVEL

# **ALL THAT LOVE ALLOWS**

(THE BEGGARS IN THE SUN)

PAUL DARCY BOLES

AUTHOR OF "THE STREAK"

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NEW YORK

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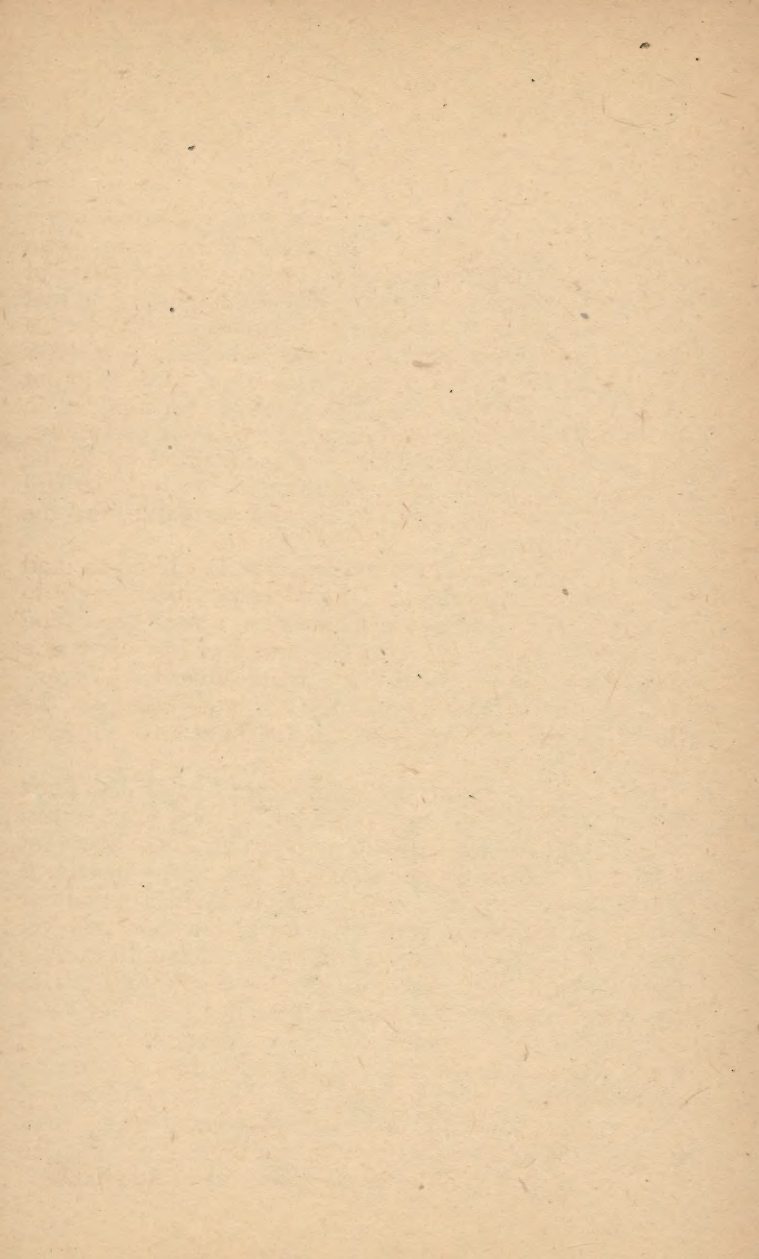
**AGAIN, TO DOROTHY**

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SPRING





## CHAPTER I

FRIDAYS ARE THE days the beggars come out in my town. Damn, but you see a bait of beggars. I was walking down Royal Street, not far from Government, with the statue of Admiral Semmes sticking up black and important on that concrete shaft in the middle of the road and the cars, a little farther down on Government, scooping themselves down into the tunnel under the river, or coming up out of it like they were shaking themselves and blinking in the sun. The beggars were along there about every nine, ten yards; old niggers with their faces lifted up to the light and their blind old eyes somehow stiller than still water and their old faces patient and peaceable, and the tin cups out.

The man who plays the musical saw, he's blind too and kind of bald—looks the kind of peaceable citizen ought to belong to the Chamber of Commerce, a neat expression about him, and a nice suit. The sound of his saw was a soft whine in the air. He was playing "Over the Waves." And the sky so blue above the Gulf, out there past the thick old yellow river, down at the bottom of Government Street.

I was on my way to get a hound for Suzy Ellen. She's been talking up a storm about a hound for a year, seems. Suzy Ellen's my old woman, nineteen and fine. She's got a kind of hell-raking proud look to her, and I surmise if you dressed her up to match that look she'd put other women to shame the way a bluejay shames a blackbird; but she'd be sharper and cutting about it too, the way a razor is sharp. Well, some ask me how I can put up with the rough tongue that woman has, but hell, I'm Carp Rambo; I'm the easygoing man of creation. And besides, when the mood's on her she can cook like a hurrying angel. And there's other things. She'll go on gadding and probing and knocking with her tongue and be blessing me out for a long stretch of time and then all of a sudden she's up against me the way a white fire would be, and

her bones like something melting and her skin feeling hot and wiry and fine; well, you know how it is then.

This thing about the hound had gone on so long it was starting to eat into me and I'd think about it even when she wasn't jawing about it, so I figured today was as good as any. You'd think a hound, a pretty good hound, the way she wanted, would be a decency you could find in that town without hardly turning around, but not so. I'd done some looking and I couldn't figure how to find what she wanted or even if I found it, how to own it. Damned hounds are costly, if you want a prize. Now, I don't mean an old eat-up scratching wobbly-hound hound. I mean a sit-up-and-look-around hound, a hound with the pride of God in him and a beller you can hear from Conception Street way out to Chickasaw, just riaowing through the air and lifting the hair up on your neck and making you glad you listened. I mean a hound that walks like a boy on the first morning of the world, with that spring in his step, a hound that will get his nose to a trail and not give up till he's run the trail to the end and a rod past that. Just hounds are plenty and cheap enough, but a hound with the heart I wanted . . . well, I don't know. But that was what Suzy Ellen wanted, and I declared to myself not to go home with less. I swore a kind of vow that way. It was a good morning for vow swearing. They don't make them any better for the pure luck of taking breath.

I had my guitar slung over my shoulder and a couple of sandwiches wrapped up in wax paper and stuck in my hip pocket and my lumberjack on. It was real soft-moving spring, when the sun's just giving notice how hot it will be later, but's now just a blessing around you. You could see it in all the people along there on Royal, even the blind beggars. You could taste it and smell it.

I came to where Government Street was bearing its load of mostly Yankee traffic and I stood there a second wondering if I ought to head down to a pet store along the line where I knew they wouldn't have much in the way of hounds and where they would anyway cost too much, or if I should go on out to the pound to see if just by a miracle some fool had cast off a real dog. I didn't have much hope either way. Fact, I only had six dollars in my pocket, wages I'd got the night before for playing at the Ridge Runners' Club, which is a lot of more or less



rich gentlemen who all try to act rich, in private grounds set back off Highway 90 in the pines. They always give me plenty of whisky and beer and whatever else I want to drink, and the six dollars wasn't what you could consider poor for only two hours' actual playing and singing. Even if they didn't like to hear the old songs, and instead made me play the songs the regular hill-williams sing on radio. Well, I can sing like a hill-william, too. All you got to do is fine your voice down and squinch it in and make it come out part way through the nose. I don't like to do that for very long at a stretch because it seems like spitting on something nice.

I'd kept the six dollars rolled in a little tiny bundle no bigger than a kid's shooting marble in the end of my shoe, and Suzy Ellen hadn't found it, and I'd given her some cockadoodle tale of how Mister Phillips—he runs the Ridge Runners' Club—didn't have any ready cash but was going to pay me this morning. Suzy Ellen didn't swallow that at all, or if she did, it stuck in her craw; she knows me so well she can see through me the way you see through a creek on a clear day. I figured knowing me so well she could just go right on knowing and kind of appreciate that a hound of the pride she wanted cost money; and maybe that was the case. She slapped around with her tongue, and when I went down the walk from the place where we live right outside Whistler—it's some way back in a short woods, and the leaves around it and over the old walk green as mint—it's a place Suzy Ellen's dad built real slow, took him nine years to scabble all the parts for it together, and the roof still needs a shingle now and then—she was still wrangling and making noise behind me, in the door. I didn't pay it much mind. I could tell she wasn't tall mad, and any time I couldn't handle her, drunk or sober, mad or kitten-purring, that was the time for Carp Rambo to head for Brookley and get him a job that paid every two weeks and knuckle under to the big fist of the world. I figured I wouldn't be quite ready for that, not for another ninety years or so, anyway.

I'd just about made up my mind it was the pound first, and was turning to head that way, when something like a truck on legs brushed by me, going that fast, and then it stopped and whirled and sort of slunk its way back to me

and I see it's John Virgin. He isn't any bigger than I am, and I'm about six feet, I guess, or an inch over, but he looks like a hurricane when he pounds along waving his elbows like that. John and I grew up together and even went to school out near Whistler together a spell, making the teacher's life kind of bad but at least I guess interesting; I'd forgot then what John's real last name might be. Dwightson, or Wrightson, some such. We called him John Virgin the way you call a spavined horse Man o' War. He had some Mexican in him, not a lot, enough to give his eyes that shiny chinkapin look they have, and his hair was just as slick as a big black cap on his brown head. He always went places in a tearing breeze like that. He came back and gawked into my face and grabbed ahold of my arms and says, "Carp! I ain't seen you so long it's just like never!"

"Well," I said, "you're seeing me now, and ain't it a sorry thing?"

"I can't say you lost any weight," John said. "I can't even say you look like a married man."

"I'm married, all right, and you know it," I said. "I'd ask you out to the house for a spell but my wife and I ain't on too good speaking grounds till I bring her what she's honing for."

"Damn," John says, laughing with one side of his mouth, "I'd of thought you ought to give her plenty of that."

"I ain't heard her complain," I said. "That ain't what I got in mind, though, or what she got in mind either. Suzy Ellen wants a hound, a real good one like them slick babies they got in the kennels over around Spring Hill . . . and I ain't got the price and it's a thing's been nagging me for seems generations. You got any ideas?"

"Hell," John said. He kept ahold of my arms. "A woman gets her mind fixed on something like that, you might as well try to knock down a star for all the good it does to talk her out of it."

"Yes," I said. "And Suzy Ellen ain't an ordinary woman, and even if you could beat it out the hide of an ordinary woman, you sure couldn't out of hers. And anyhow I got a sympathy for her; I'd like for us to own a hound like that myself."

He sucked in his big lips and made out like he was thinking hard, and half screwed his eyes up at the sky.

"Carp, you doing any singing and playing?"

"Around and about, when I can, and when it don't cramp me too much. And wood cutting and lawn raking and stobbing in the earth with garden tools, when I simply got to."

"Uhm," John Virgin says.

He was always like a cat, John was. I mean the way you can't tell what a cat's thinking. He was like that even when he was a little tad. You could tell that mainly the ideas that simmered in there behind his smooth face, without a line in it, had to do with women: I never saw such a man for women, and I've seen a lot of men. But there were a lot of other plans and ideas there too, and good or bad you didn't know. It always made me a snib uneasy because with most, soon or late, you know which way they'll jump; only with John it was just by guess and by gosh. But he was an interesting man. I could see schemes just whirling back of his forehead now, there in the sun hot and good around us, and the people jostling by, and the cars skimming past. I had kind of an excited feeling in my belly, like something was about to happen. I couldn't for the life of me have pinned it down to what.

"Well," I says, "I'm on my way to the pound now, to see if they got anything might fill the bill. You can march along with me a spell if you want to, or you can just stand here making everybody walk around you." I said it cool because I wasn't too trusting of John even if I liked the thought of excitement. John used to get us into some whopping messes, in school and out. But I hadn't seen him since I got married except once when he was standing leaning on a shovel in the back of a city work truck, and then I just flapped a hand at him and he showed his teeth at me and the truck went joggeting past. That was about two years before.

"Wait," he says, and his hand grips my arm harder. "Wait, I'm trying to recollect. There was a man in some place, just the other night, down on Dauphin—"

"There's a bait of men on Dauphin, and women too," I says.

"Wait, now, damn your impatience, Carp. I'm trying



to do a friend a favor—two friends, really, because this man is a friend of mine—”

“Except you can’t think of who he is,” I says.

“Except I was drunked up and I got a few acquaintances down there on Dauphin and damn if I can remember which one says this. Wait, now, damn it!”

He kind of gave his head a shake like he was trying to tear the remembrance loose from his skull. Then he clips me on the back, hard, and says: “It was Peter Durbin, that’s who, and don’t say I never done you a favor. Listen, it all comes back to me now; we was talking late, you know how you do—”

“I sure do,” I says, and I was wondering how John got the money to sit up and talk late in those Dauphin bars. Of course, I wouldn’t know; maybe he was working steady now. But he some way didn’t look it.

“All right. And this Pete, he’s a little skinny guy, maybe sixty, you can’t tell how old, he come down from Birmingham last year and bought out the old Magnolia Bar and he’s got a good lot of customers in there, and I help out around sometimes—I can’t tend bar when there’s a lot of customers because I ain’t got the union card, but I sweep up and kind of help keep order—and he says, If we had a man could sing and play in here, we’d pick up twice the trade. Right then I thought of you. For all I know I may have said something about you. So there it is. Come on, let’s go right over there and see him now. He’ll be up. For a little bastard he’s a fireball.”

I says: “Whoa up, John. I told you I was on my way to get a hound for Suzy Ellen.” And I pulled a little away, but his hand followed right after and hell, you can’t be outright mean to a man like that. Besides, what I heard so far was kind of interesting. I just wanted to hear more before I moved in any direction, was all.

He shook my shoulder. “Look, you big fool. I’m putting you on the trail of enough money to buy six hounds and take them back to that lady of yours in a pack. Pete’ll pay good wages, I know he will. That’s one thing about him. And hell, what you doing with that instrument now except carrying it slung on your back and telling me out of your own mouth you got to scratch dirt for a living?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I says. “I don’t got to do anything I don’t want to, I reckon.”

"Oh, damn it," he kind of moans. "When they made you they sure as hell broke the mold for pride, Carp." With the hand that wasn't holding me he ran his fingers back through his hair and it laid down just as slick as it had before. "All it would take of your time is a few hours a night."

"I know them few hours," I says. "Them few hours, with the customers all asking for things the hill-williams can do and like it, but I can't do at all and like it. And furthermore, one night a week for the Ridge Runners, and maybe another night for the M.E. Church, and course around Christmas all the parties—them things pay all I want them to pay. You're trying to steer me just the way my damned old woman tries to steer me sometimes, and I be damn' if I take it too graciously from you, John."

He looked at me close. His eyes were just as steady and round as black marbles. You couldn't see past them, neither.

"You got bones in your head," he says. "If you don't want to try this for a natural way to make so much you'll never even have to worry about the old woman's jawing, then go ahead, and go to hell. I said this Pete'll pay good. You can sing what you want to sing and play what you want to play. Pete's a real guy, not one of these wants a human juke box. It's a job like you could get in Chicago or New York if you had any guts and gumption to go there to get; and it's right here in town. Well, what you say?"

I didn't say anything for a second; then I let out a whistling sigh. It was that last that got me. That about playing what I wanted to play and singing the way I wanted to. I didn't believe it. I'd been set back on my heels too many times. I know there are a lot of folks laugh at me. I know they consider Carp Rambo's songs a kind of jollification, even the sad ones. I'd tried singing their way and, as I say, I could for a stretch; but it seemed mean and silly and it made me feel a little, you know, like you were dirty. Even if you couldn't see the dirt.

But I figured that this day with all its splash of light was made for something meaningful, and part of the meaning was the way I'd run into John Virgin here; and

the guitar suddenly felt better against my back there: the sling, some way, felt lighter.

"Come on," I says. "The only way I know to buy a horse or a hound or a whore is to take a look at it first."

He laughed and grabbed my arm tighter and we swung around and bulled our way back the way I'd come, going toward Dauphin. The thought came to me kind of bright that if everything did by some pure lightning of chance turn out fine, I'd have enough to once in a while drop a piece of change in the tin cups of the beggars. They sat with their faces turned up to the broad light, taking it like they were drinking it, deep and whole.

## CHAPTER II

DAUPHIN STREET, in that sun that lasts mostly nine months of the year, looked scabby but still happy. I'm twenty-four come August and of course I didn't live in the days when the town was quieter; but I always figured from what was underneath the soreness and the scabs on Dauphin, and on a lot of the town's other streets too, you could tell the easy sweet way the town had once been. Hell, this year it's 250 years old; there ain't any older, I guess, except down to Florida, at St. Augustine. And that's different, like a dream. Once I car-hiked down in that part of the country—it was before Suzy Ellen and I got hitched—and it was just like one long dream. Like it wasn't real at all, and something might crumble under you the way sand crumbles when you walk in it; the air is soft and like it isn't going to last. But my town isn't like that. Dauphin Street had the remains of galleries that I guess were once used, and used a good deal, people sitting on them with their elbows spraddled on the iron-lace railings in the cool of the evening; and the buildings are mainly white and dazzling to your eyes in the light. And the sky looks bluer up through the thin slit of street, hard-



ly room for two cars, but with traffic pushing and stinking and chugging along it every minute of the day and night. I expect there's more business goes on along Dauphin Street, in more patches of ways, than along most in the nation. I mean everything from needle and thread to bathtubs to used guitars to sailors' slop shops to bicycle repair places; and all of it swarming. There's a hum along there that sings a kind of song all its own. I never figured out the name of the song. Maybe it hasn't got a name.

We walked down old Dauphin to the Magnolia Bar. It was a deep-windowed place with heavy walls as far through as a bull's brisket, the windows painted a slobby green up higher'n your eyes so you couldn't see in from outside. The beer smell was like a solid wall that some way you walked through and wrapped around you.

John says, "Wait right here and don't go way, you big ape."

I kind of grinned at him and sat down at one of the tables nigh the door. There was a shy swash of sunshine coming in the door and falling to the dark floor and painting it off-white. There were four other fellows, I guessed from the plant at Brookley or some place because they wore work badges on their shirts, and they was slumped around a table that had shots and beers on it, down a dozen feet along the wall. One guy no older than me, with red-rimmed eyes and a funny wart on his chin, was telling a story, kind of mumbling it. The other guy across from him kept saying, "Shut up, shut up," sort of tired and halfhearted but good-humored. They was all pretty boiled. John, he'd gone through a door at the back of the place. I sat and waited and thought about a hound. It would be nice to reach down and feel a hound, a real good hound, stick his cool nose in your hand. There was an ad on the wall selling beer. It was part of a calendar. The calendar was pretty old. A party of flies had sat on it in its time. The girl on the calendar was smiling, but she didn't look like she wanted to smile any more. Her bubbies was nice, though, in the sweater she wore. I wonder how them fellows learn to paint bubbies so good.

After what seemed a marvel of time, like I'd been haunched there forever, along come John from in back where there wasn't any light, and right after him a little

man with a dried-up face like a persimmon been on the shelf too long, the same dry lines in it, and white, too, and he had grizzled eyebrows that was thin but tangled up on the ends and made his eyes look like he was smiling. He didn't have a mean mouth, but it wasn't a mouth going to give you a swift good day neither. I judged him to be the further side of fifty and maybe even sixty the way John had said; he was mighty spry though, and the way he pulled out a chair and swung it around and sat down and beckoned John to sit down too, and ducked his head at the same time and said, "Hydy," made you feel there was a good power of rubber bands in him. He sat and stared at me for a second. He had green eyes, green the color of grapes that haven't started to soften up and grow yet, shiny, and with the centers just as black as my granny's pitch pot. He says, after a moment, "John tells me you're a singer."

I nodded. "That's the truth, sir. That's about all I've ever done of my own accord in this world."

"Well, now, I'm looking for a singer," he says. He shoots out his hand of a sudden, and I takes it. A skinny hand like a crab's claw, it's so tough and slick-hard; but you could feel the power in it. Not any sort of a softness in his voice, but not rough either. Just all business, the way some people are for most of their lives.

John, he gives a little nervous-like giggle and shoots his head forward. "He's a lot better'n he looks, Pete. Don't let that big soupy look like a calf fell down a privy fool you."

"He looks all right," Pete says. "I don't much care how a man looks, so he's dependable and can furnish what I want in here."

It was like he had brushed off John with the back of his hand, like getting rid of a bothersome gnat. You think John noticed that? If you did, you don't know John. John beams. "He's able to do both them things without turnin' a hair. He's got more tunes in that guitar than you could find in a stack of records any place. And last year he had a program of his own on a radio station and he was so good he got a chance to go up to Birmingham and the fool never took it. He's stuck to this town with glue on the seat of his britches and you can't shake him. Or meb-be," John says, leaning forward—he was getting warmed

up now—"mebbe it's that wife of his keeps him so close. I—"

Pete Durbin turns a little and looks at John. "Go back and get us a couple of drinks," he says. That was all.

John tied off what he was saying and stood up and says, "Aye," and moves back in the shadow. Pete turns around and looks at me.

"All right, hearing you're good is a help, but that son of a bitch could talk the ears off a squirrel. But before I even hear you, I'll lay it on the line. Nine to one every night except Sunday and all the extra you get in nickels, dimes, quarters, and even dollars. Plus fifteen a week."

"Fifteen?" I says.

"Fifteen. You can see from that, I ain't union music and I ain't about to be. The Magnolia ain't a place anybody's going to make much trouble about that way." He put his lips together and gave the girl on the calendar a sour expression. "Take it or leave it before I waste my time hearing you and you waste yours playing."

"Well," I says, "if I was to take a solid job—"

"If you was to take a solid job the King of Persia might stroll in here and get to be a regular customer, too," he says. "I ain't blaming you, I know how it is with you singers. I used to dabble around with singing and playing myself; my mother played a dulcimer. That was around Birmingham and earlier, up in Huntsville in the mountains. I'm just laying it on the line; fifteen is all I can afford. Them nickels and dimes and so forth mount up to more than you mighty well might think on a payday week end. Now, I'm not going to say another word."

John come back and stomped a fifth of Old Grandad on the table and hooked some glasses out from under his armpit and sat down and started to pour. The bottle had one of them dinguses on top of it that pour it out neat. I watched the amber fill up in the three glasses. It looked nice and warm in the sun.

I says, "Mister Durbin, fifteen seems like a very little for a man admires real music and does his best to play it with his admiration." John's hand holding the bottle wavered a little and he slopped a small stream over the edge.

Pete looked level at me and says, "Take it or leave it." I didn't know. Fifteen ain't much; it ain't much more



than I could make with the Ridge Runners and the church and so forth. But I knew he wasn't fooling about them nickels and dimes either. Nobody throws those around like the Brookley crowd and especially those that light in town from Prichard and Chickasaw and Whistler and those other settlements, with it just burning their pants and a whole night ahead. I figured I'd give it a whirl.

I nodded. "I'll need a ten advance," I says.

Pete Durbin stares at me, and his eyebrows are smiling but that's all. His mouth is so disgusted it's like he could chew the calendar right off the wall. He looks at it hard, then back to me. "I expected you would. Drink up, and come on back and I'll listen."

We tossed the drinks back. I sure would admire to have enough to drink that type liquor all my days. Outside, a couple of niggers went by, little boys, and then a big boy, all walking loose and free, and the traffic slid and crawled and honked and braked and hooted. I could feel the peace of the drink hit the center of my belly and kick hot, and shine all through me. "Come on," Pete says. And to John, "Bring the bottle." We traipsed past the legs and feet of the four men sitting along the side wall. One of them was asleep and snoring blubbery. The other three were just sitting there. Pete gives them a look and steps over closer to them and leans on the table on his knuckles. "Anything more, gents?"

"Yeah." The guy who'd been telling the story waggles his warty chin toward his glass. "Another shot, Dad."

"You betcha," Pete says. "John, fix this man up. He's drinking Calvert's."

"Right away," John says. He stands back for a second and nods and smiles at me while I follow Pete Durbin back in the shadows. He looks biggety and just as proud as if he's birthed me, free hand. Fifteen bucks a week, a sure enough hell of a salary, I thought.

Pete opened a door ahead of me and I stepped in. I guess it was his office; it wasn't much of a room but it was cleaner than I'd expected. A nigger boy was asleep in a chair beside a desk with a mop head up in his fists and his own head slumped down and his ear hugging the mop handle. The mop end draped over his head like a beat-up palm tree. Pete shook his shoulder a little. "Hey,

Loosh." Loosh woke up fast but smooth, and smiled and stood up easy all in one move, and blinked a couple times. "Swab out around front a while," Pete says.

"Yes, sir," Loosh says. I figured Pete Durbin was a pretty good man to work for. The boy Loosh went out and the door snicked to behind him. I unslung my guitar and gave it a daddle-dee-yay on the strings. Pete set the bottle that he'd took from John, on the desk. He stood back leaning against the desk with his skinny haunches. He folded his arms. The drink was still shining in me. I brushed around and rambled a bit, but not much, on the strings. She was tuned as good as she's ever going to be.

Pete says, "Tune up by ear?"

I nodded. "Most pianos is out of tune. It's the Gulf air."

I hummed around a little more; then I looked up. "What would you like to hear, Mister Durbin?"

"Hell, that's up to you, son. I like a lot of songs."

"I hear you don't like hill-william, though."

"Well, maybe I do and maybe I don't. You sing something."

"All right," I says. "Here we go."

I don't know as I've ever enjoyed myself as much as right then, singing to that little dry-faced man. I couldn't tell you why if you was to quiz me from now to breakfast. It was the drink and feeling free and easy and do as I please on account of the salary that wasn't any salary, I guess. And kind of liking something in him you don't see in just any old passenger in creation.

Out of the corner of my eye—I'm one throws his head back because the notes come up rounder that way—I could see him sort of unstanch and uncork himself, slumping back farther and with his folded arms looser. I sang "Lord Randall," and then I went right into "Barbara Allen." Then, on account of to me "Barbara" always goes right along with this other one, I poured right along without a halt into "He's Gone Away." You know how that high note on the end of "He's Gone Away" has to be squeezed down and whispered and kept hushed as a funeral in the roof of your mouth, so it's a gold thing you hold on your tongue like a little treasure piece and then let drop—so you can hear the gold clink in the air after the song's gone past? Maybe you don't know, but that all right; that's the way it should be. I never did it

better. The "over ya-ndrew" came out soft and trailing and there was that one, two seconds afterward, and I clamped the strings so's they wouldn't buzz from the last chord.

Old man Durbin grinned. "Well, damn it, you can do that kind." He kind of shook himself. "You know a thing they call 'The Fox?'"

"Ain't that a dilly, too?" I says. So I sang him "The Fox."

John come in while I was doing it and shut the door, not making a chink of noise behind us. He squatted down in a corner with his arms perked on his knees and his wrists hanging. When I got done with singing "The Fox" Pete Durbin says, "That'll do." I lowered the guitar to the floor and propped it up with the bridge part balanced safe between the wall and floor. The old man passed the bottle over. "Take one to cinch the bargain."

"I'd like to, thank you," I says.

I tipped her back. That was fine whisky. When I brought her down Pete took her with one hand and put a ten-dollar bill in the pocket of my lumberjack with the other. That damned hound was starting to look mighty close. John stood up and he was grinning like a shoat in a corncrib. "What'd I tell you, Pete?"

"Nothing I couldn't of found out myself, but I thank you for bringing him around," Pete says crisp and cool. He turns to me again. "All right. Start tonight—tonight's a payday night and tomorrow night'll be even bigger. You don't have to sing your lungs out; and you don't have to sing everything they throw at you. But you know and I know the nickels and dimes is going to come faster the more crap you sing, so sing some crap. Show up at nine like I told you." While I shook hands with him again, John, he was helping himself to the bottle Pete had put on the desk once more. Pete turned as John was setting the bottle down. He squinted his eyes like in a strong light. "Hell and damnation!"

John just looked at him like he couldn't for the life of him figure out what was wrong. Then he shrugged and come over and punched me in the belly. "You're in, you son of a bitch."

"Yes," I said. "Help me loop this back over around

here, will you?" He did, and I jiggled it a couple of times till it slung so it felt right.

"Well," I says, "I'll be here, Mister Durbin. I still don't think fifteen is a very much to pay. I don't hardly ever take jobs like this and I had mighty few every-nights jobs in my life."

"And them not long," John says quick. "But this'll be different, Pete."

"It better be," Pete says. "You'll go out on your ass like a pine falling if it don't, son."

"Sure," I says. "I know that."

He knowed and so did I that we would get along. John didn't know. John says again: "This'll be different. He'll be here." He had ahold of my arm. "I'll see he's here. Hell, I'll haul him here."

"Oh, I know he'll be here," the old man says. "There ain't any doubt about that."

He opened the door, but before he did he scrooched around and scooped up the bottle from the desk. He held it swinging and walked ahead of us out into the big room again. The four guys was still sitting in just about exactly the same positions around the table up front. Pete walked pretty fast for an old man. I figured he thought pretty fast too. He had sure thought me into working cheap as I ever want to. It was funny the way I decided, going out of there, that I didn't mind it so much because he knowed something good that not everybody knows. I could give any man a fair whirl so long as he knowed about that.

Outside on Dauphin again, I tell you I felt pretty fair. It was the two drinks, and the ten dollars in my lumber-jack along with the six I already had; sixteen bucks, all in a lump, and the sun so strong.

John and I walked a little space along, maybe a block, past the pawnshops and the secondhand furniture stores and the bookshops with the old books looking so mean and gray in the sun and marked to ten and fifteen and twenty-five cents. Some day I'm going to get me all the books I want and stack them up and really read them. There must be a sight of knowledge in them old things. But I don't guess I'll ever really do it.

John was whistling a puckery little tune, bold and mournful too, and kind of slaunching his shoulders from one side to the other. A couple of girls that maybe were



chippies and maybe weren't, but one with a dress the color of flame just before it gets blue hot, that jumping red, went by, with plenty of smooth wiggling, and John Virgin, he just turned completely around and walked backward on his heels alongside me, the tune going louder on his lips and his shiny eyes getting big and shinier. I tried to nudge him over but I couldn't move quick enough to keep him from lumping right backward into a fat lady who was puffing along, and she says, "Oaough," and John whirls around and laughs and ducks around her. The lady glares up at me and lifts her nose and marches on, hot and wet and mad enough to fry.

John leans against the green wall of one of the state liquor stores farther down. He's still laughing when I come up. Then the laugh goes out and he just looks meaning and hopeful and takes my arm again. "Damn, did you see them two?"

"I saw," I says. "Nobody could help seeing."

"Boy, wouldn't you like to have that?"

"I got all I need," I says. Some sawdust and box cartons and the cool smell of the liquor store was out in the street. There were a few fellows and a woman in there buying. That sixteen bucks felt big. I was trying to remember what a pint cost. Of course, it wouldn't be the best liquor, but I figured I could do it and still have plenty to put down on the hound. With a regular job you can get a loan. I could even go to the kennel in Spring Hill and make a deal. Maybe I would just do that. I tell you, I was feeling pretty bright.

John leaned there against the green wall, all big and satisfied but looking forward to something too, edgy. I could see the flicks of black in his eyes shining while he looked me over.

"Well, we done it, boy."

"Yes," I says. "And I'm saying my thanks for that. I don't rightly know if I ought to thank you too much, because it ain't exactly a job like you said. New York and Chicago," I says. "Some New York and Chicago."

He rubbed a hand along one ear. "Now, look, Carp. You don't know what all this can build into. I got ideas. You never had you no other job like this, did you?"

"I didn't for a fact," I says.

"Well, I got ideas. I got ways to get you a name here;

then mebbe we can consider other places. How you like something like singing in the Battle House every night for them fancy bitches goes in there? Mebbe a hundred dollars a week?"

I looked at him. "How you like to go climb an oak tree in Bienville Square and act like a squirrel?"

"Aw," he says, like I pained him; but he wasn't pained, not John Virgin. "That a way to put it to a friend got you a job, not the best in the world, granted, but a job?"

"Forget it," I says. "I'm grateful." Some way I didn't like him thinking about another job so quick. It didn't seem right to the old man. It didn't seem like treating Durbin the way he was treating me. He'd told me it was fifteen; he hadn't lied one lie.

The ideas John had bothered me. I wished I could tell what he was thinking from a look at his face. It was just as smooth and silent and watching and shining as so much solid quiet oil. But the drinks and the sun and the money felt grand.

I says: "Show you I'm a friend, John, and grateful too, by damn. Let's go in here and get us a pint. Then I got a notion to take the bus out to Spring Hill and look me over some hounds for my old woman."

"Sure," John says. "Sure, I'd be glad to go along. But you don't need to get no pint. I got a whole fifth right here."

And be damned if he didn't snake down in his side pocket and haul up a whole fifth of Old Grandad. The seal wasn't even busted. It kind of scared me the easy way he done it. I thought he must have pretty deep pockets that he'd made that way for what you might call emergencies just like this. John was laughing all over his face with his teeth showing bright as little tombstones.

"Fifteen ain't much, Carp, but there's a hell of a lot of advantages to working at the Magnolia. Here, let me screw this cap off . . ."

"The hell with it," I says. "I'm going in and get me a pint anyhow."

"How come? Don't you like Grandad? You took a big enough gollup back there. Damn it, I—"

"No, you keep it," I says. "You drink that and I'll drink mine. I guess maybe you figure you earned it, anyway."

He gave me a look. Then he says easy: "All right. Perfectly all right, Carp, that's the way you want it."

"Well, it sure certain is," I says. I left him waiting for me in the sun while I went in the liquor store. I kind of wished I was going out to Spring Hill all by myself. Either by myself or maybe with some men who'd talk hounds, slow and considering, instead of with John. It wasn't a wonderful job, but I liked the idea of it right now. I liked the idea of coming home with the right hound and saying to Suzy Ellen, careless as a breeze, "There's your damned old pup." But John he stayed out there, leaned up against the wall, and I guessed I was just being mean and unsociable and chinchy.

## CHAPTER III

WE WENT OVER toward the Square, along Dauphin in all that sun. It was a day. Now and again I'd take a drink, and John, he'd take one out of his big bottle. I didn't figure that pint was going to hurt me. It was just mellowing me up some and getting me warm. It seemed kind of like every mother's son and daughter's daughter walking along spring-clean and bright was my brother or sister. It takes quite a power of whisky to get me drunk; but any man can feel the edges of meanness wear away after a few. I didn't feel so bad about John now. Way in the back of my head I still didn't trust him any more'n you trust a sudden squall if you're a fisherman out there in the bay. But I wasn't sad he was with me.

We ambled along, him cutting down his regular tearing rush to a sort of saunter. We come to where Bienville Square stands up big and important under the sky. The boughs of the trees in there are so intermingled that just a bit of the sun gets through, and what falls down is green. The fountain in the center of the square was playing mild as silk, and the water streamed from the

little top basin over the other basins and splashed down to the big basin where the squidgy goldfish swim around fat-eyed and marvelous. The surface of the water had a few matches on it and some candy-bar wrappers lipping near the rim like little boats. I don't hold with people foolish enough to clutter up a nice fountain like that. I leaned my hands on the low steel fence around the fountain and looked up. There was a sparrow bathing himself in the basin second from the top. He'd perch right on the rim there and wiggle his wings, brrrt, fast as that, and he made the old pigeons, fifty pigeons anyhow, that preened and waddled and bulked and sailed themselves like slow bombers coming in to land around the fountain—he made them look cumbrous and lazy. There isn't much about a pigeon you can like. A dove has a lot more to offer. A town pigeon like that has lost all his wildness and just gets fat and wobbles and looks stupid. But a sparrow has a wise free look, snappy as hell, especially around the eyes. A little girl with soft frizzy yellow hair was standing holding herself up on the bars of the fence, and she watched the sparrow and laughed high, and it was so nice there I had to laugh too.

John says, "Come on there's a bus for Spring Hill right now over by Walgreen's."

I says: "I ain't hurrying for the mayor or the chief of police or Father Time. There's a bus every so often and we'll get the next." I liked it there, watching the fountain and the sparrows. The old men who sit all the year, practically, in Bienville Square, were crouched happy on their benches, and kids were chasing squirrels—they never catch them squirrels—and the squirrels were going gray and fawn-brown as whisks around the shrubbery and trees. When we left the fountain and ambled on toward the street I stopped and watched a couple more kids, boys, playing tag up around that big stand where they make speeches and have band concerts and so forth, and I watched the park man picking up chunks of orange peel from the steps that go down to the can that says *White Only* over the door.

I stepped down in the blue-black shadow of the side wall on those stairs and took me another drink. My pint was only about half gone. You know how it is when you got a feeling you're going to get something special,



like that hound. You look at other dogs with a judging eye. I hadn't seen a decent animal downtown this morning. I stuck the bottle back in one of the side pockets of my lumberjack and come up, and we walked along over to the street and then crossed and meandered down past the First National Bank and stood on the corner in front of Walgreen's. The buses came around the corner from Dauphin slow and stinking and rumbling, and there were people shoulder to shoulder on the corner, everybody feeling fine. I had the notion everyone felt a little like me. It wasn't only the drinking.

John's eyes were just as black and shiny as new watermelon seeds and the melon just split.

"Sure makes you feel like you'd like to summon a woman, don't it, Carp?"

I says, "It sure does, and lot of other good things too."

The sun was warm over my back and around the guitar and through my clothes.

The bus for Spring Hill come along and we got on and sat down, and the old leather smell of the seats warmed by sun was up our noses, and the people around, so gay; even the bus driver looked happy, and mostly they look like they been fed on sour greens for a terrible time. He looked happy to me, anyway. John was just kind of smiling and nodding his head and whistling real soft, like a teakettle when it comes to a boil, slow and considering and maybe planning; I wouldn't know.

When we pulled off Dauphin and over to Old Shell Road—that being the way you get to Spring Hill itself—most of the passengers had got off except for a couple of niggers in their section at the back of the bus. John said, "You want to go to them big kennels, we might as well drop off at the Country Club gates."

"I was planning doing just that," I says. I was a little tired of sitting forward the way I had to do to keep the guitar from jamming back into the seat. But it was sure a healthy day for riding. A convertible Buick went around the bus like one of those jet ships that tear through the sky from Brookley, except being a convertible and just a car it gave you enough time to take a look at it and to wonder what it would be like to be the man sitting in it. It was a light blue like a bird's egg. We went grinding and a-plumpping along and up Spring Hill itself. It's a

long hill. It seems like you're going up the rise toward the top almost forever. We went past the stores and then by where the hill levels out toward the Country Club road and takes a little dip. Spring Hill in the old days used to have a streetcar line went out there. Spring Hill, my daddy used to tell me, was the home of bear and deer galore. Now it's still kind of wild looking in spots, with the vegetation coming up so black-green in the uncleared sections that you don't know what might live in there. A mort of snakes and not much else, I reckon. And in the cleared parts there's some monstrous houses, swimming pools and all. Everything is sweet-smelling and ripe and clear, and the air in deep summer is about ten degrees cooler out there.

We came to the road and swung off the bus, and the driver, he looks around and wrinkles up his nose a little and says, "Take it easy, boys."

I says, "We aim to, thank you kindly," and we were standing there while the bus went off until the sound of its heavy-beating engine got lonesome on the air. Weren't any cars whooshing by for the minute, so we walked across the road and down and through the gates and along a way. The lawns of the houses there were as big as whole blocks back in town, and some of them was clipped and clean like a carpet. In weather like this it made you want to walk along in your bare feet. There were a good many niggers tending the grass and raking up pinestraw and murmuring around the lawns. There were big patches of shade from the big old trees. The sky burned just that plain pure blue. There's a blue almost that color in Suzy Ellen's eyes when she's laughing. Not always, but sometimes.

It makes a man proud to be a man, and walk on the earth on a day like this one, and proud to be able to love a woman or sing or do anything comes graceful to his hands.

We didn't turn right on the road that forks out that way to the Country Club itself and goes around the other way to the Bit and Spur Club where they ride horses; we went straight on, a little left, and pretty soon I could hear some high barks in the air like welcome music. "Them's hounds," I says, and John says, "I didn't think they was nightingales."

The kennels was on the left alongside a monstrous big house that was all one story and rambled off a piece down a gully. You could see water winking from a little artificial creek they'd cut behind it. The dogs' runs were made of stout wire about seven feet high, and there was regular rows of them going along, with the houses for the dogs painted a dark brown-stain color, the same as the big house was. There was a station wagon parked in the drive and another one, a little older, farther down and a Cadillac sticking its rear fins out of the garage. We went tramping down the smooth oyster-shell gravel drive and around toward the back, and from a corner of the kennels a nigger who'd been bent over there with a pan, making passes with it at a couple of pups, straightened up. He was pretty old and he had a serious, tired, dead-set kind of tough old face. His gray shirttail flapped around when he straightened and turned. You could smell dog on the air, nice clean dog. Anybody'd be proud to live in kennels like those.

The nigger says, "You boys looking for somebody?"

I started to say, "We want to look at a hound—" but John Virgin, he stiffens up. I could feel him stiffen. "Who the hell asked you, Uncle?"

The old man wipes his mouth with the back of one hand, where he's been chewing tobacco or snuff. "You want to see somebody here, gentlemen?"

John cut in before I could say anything again. "Me and my friend come to buy a dog," he says.

The nigger ignored John. He says to me: "You just wait right here. If you don't mind, please. I'll go call Mister Hattram. I reckon he's in the house."

He started off around a long path to the house standing way up there and looking cool with magnolia and oak shadow over it. There were maybe five hundred azaleas all along the side of the house. You could just see glints of the brown stain through them. They puffed out in bright blobs and made the whole place crazy and yet peaceable with color.

John Virgin says after the nigger's back, "Take all day damn it."

I says, "What's got into you?"

He says, "Damn' nigger."

"He wasn't impudent. He was just asking about our

business. Don't you reckon that's what he gets paid for?"

"He don't get paid to give me his lip."

"He didn't give you his lip," I says. "What's got into you, anyhow?"

John looks down at the gravel, so white it makes you blink and leaves a circle of white on your sight when you look away. A few feet from us at the corner of the run some of the young pups was sniffing and tumbling. They were just babies, fat as wieners, with their puzz faces staring out and looking meek as kittens or mice. But full of the devil. They were coon hounds, that black shiny kind, with ears that you could tell would be long when they got a little older. And they rolled and scrambled and went "Whmm, whmm," whining glad at each other and us.

John pushed his lips out. "Well, damn it all, Carp, when I come into a place like this, a rich son of a bitch of a place, it makes me mad. Don't it make you mad too?"

"Damn it," I says. "If it makes you mad why the hell did you have to come along? No, it don't make me mad; I like to see a place looking like this. If I had the money I'd have me one just like it. Except I'd have horses too, and a fountain running whisky."

John chews on that for a second or so. "Well, all I know is it makes me mad." He had the bottle out and he took another drink. His brown Adam's apple bobbed up and down. He took the bottle down. "It makes me mad 'cause I don't have anything like it and mebbe never will. It makes me so damn tearin' mad I'd like to chunk rocks through all the windows over there and kick the hell out of the damn' dogs. You suppose the guy owns this place got his dough any way except layin' back and gettin' it from his old man? And mebbe his old man stole it from my old man's old man, for all I know."

"Boy, howdy, ain't that a way to feel," I says. "You best throw that bottle away if that's the way it makes you feel. You just sorry for yourself, and next thing I know you'll be on your butt cryin'."

John turns his head and kind of smiles at me. You couldn't read boo from that smile.

"Oh, I ain't about to cry. I ain't even going to show anybody that's the way I feel. I ain't that dumb, Carp. It was just that stupid nigger riled me."



"Well," I says, "if that's all there is in the world to rile you, you got a mighty little to get riled about."

We stood there in the sun a while and I couldn't of felt much better if I was made king of the moon. I watched the pups tumble and butt at each other and jump. You could see beyond there to the next run and there was a whole lot of runs beyond that. The air smelled rich as honey. The water winked through leaves from the creek farther down.

I heard crunching on the gravel then, and here come the old nigger again, his felt hat bobbing along slow and him walking fast as he could, like a crab with his arms swinging so; and behind him come Clint Hattram. I'd seen Mr. Hattram downtown sometimes; everybody does, and once somebody I was with pointed him out to me and says, "There goes the biggest bastard in town except for his daddy." And maybe that's what John meant, but damned if I was going to agree right then with anything John says in that sorry poor-mouth way. See, Clint Hattram's daddy was Buck Hattram, the Senator, and sure Lord there ain't any man with a softer hand under hens than the old Senator. But I didn't have nothing against Senator Buck or his son Clint neither, and didn't make out to have. What I come there for was a dog, and that was Clint's business. I don't reckon he needed the money; he probably just liked doing it. Anyway, it didn't matter none. I just come there for a dog.

Now there's men, not a lot of them, but some men, that right out of the corner make you wonder why you don't like them more. This Clint Hattram was one. But I didn't think much about it because, like I say, I was set-minded for a dog, and not for anything else. Mr. Hattram stood there a second, sizing us up.

He was a solid-built man about thirty or thirty-five, I'd judge, and he had a solid kind of red face and soft sandy hair, but not much of it around the forehead. His belly was pretty trim. His eyes was a light blue and set kind of odd in his face so you'd say he was suspicious of you the first time he looked at you. Or that could have been only the way he always looked. He was wearing a white shirt, without a tie, and black pants and he carried a leather strop in one hand. The nigger went on past and around a corner of the next run, and Hattram says easy

but brisk: "Hydy, boys. Come to do some dog buying?"

"Yes, sir, Mister Hattram." I says. "I'm Carp Rambo, and this here's my friend John."

He lifts a hand and cocks it in the air like a half-salute. "Hydy. Well, I don't know if I've got anything fit to hunt with that I'd want to sell just offhand. I've got a few for sale but—well, you can take a look."

"Fine," I says.

So we followed around the corner and down the line of runs. In the third run we passed a big lean coon dog came running up to the fence and hurled himself against it. He was a beauty, with the sun making water-wiggles on his jet-black sides and his eyes just full of holy running. I mean he looked like, you let him out, he'd track forever. He let out a hoo-hooing big-chested whine at Hattram, but Hattram didn't pay him no more nevermind than if he was one of the posts. I reached through and tickled his nose and then went along after John, who hadn't stopped either. We went past four, five more runs. In one of them a coon hound bitch sprawled with her dugs swole up, half asleep on the little porch in front of her house, and I figured she'd littered them pups down in the end run. There was enough dog around there to make you happy morning till night, for a truth. And every one of those runs was as clean as a plate in a parlor that nobody ever eats from.

In a run down close to the end there was two dogs, one a big one with sharp shoulders and one smaller but not runty, looking even while he leaned up, pawing the fence that way, sharp as Satan himself. You can tell by a dog's shoulder-set how his gait will be, and this one to me looked fast as fire. He didn't have the pure coloring; there was a little dapple of extra white thrown in here and there. Clint Hattram stopped alongside the fence and lifted a hasp and let himself in the door. The dogs, the big one and the good smaller one, dropped down. The big one leaped up toward him, and he swung the strop at it and the dog kind of cringed in midair and dropped down and stood off and back, a little wary.

Hattram calls: "Come on in; they're all right. And if they ain't all right they soon will be. None of my dogs are mean but some are a little dumb. Like this one," he says, pointing at the smaller one, that hadn't even tried to

jump on him, the way a dog most naturally will, but had gone off when he came in and now stood in a corner just watching. "Come here, Bo, hyah huh huh; here, Bol"

Bo, he wasn't having none. He just stood there. His tail wasn't down but there was a distrusting look about him. In the sun his coat was sleek as water in a black river when the light touches it and the water's running looking sleepy but full of life.

I reckoned right then he wasn't as dumb as Hattram made out he was. There's a funny thing between a man and a dog, a good dog. Sometimes a man can never get to own him. Maybe the dog doesn't think he's man enough. I wouldn't know. But right there, watching that Bo, I got a prickery feeling in my chest and belly that was like the feeling I'd had back on Royal Street when John wanted me to go with him. Except this was a bigger thing. Right then I wanted that Bo to be the dog I took to Suzy Ellen. I knew if God put him on earth it was for that purpose and no other.

Bo, he kept standing his ground, and you could see the red come up hard in Hattram's face. John and I were in the run now, and I guess I must have left the door open, because Hattram was moving for the dog and the dog had backed up in his corner, and Clint said, "You stupid bastard," and a lot of other things I don't think I could say to a dog like that—and then all of a once, slick as grease and twice as black, whip through his legs went Bo and out the door and streaking up the drive before you could even think about it.

Hattram made a swiping pass with the strop, but it cut air. The other dog, the big one, let out a "Hoo, hoo!" like they do, and Hattram turned and give this other one a cut across the back and the dog went ky-yi-ing for one of the brown doghouses.

I whipped right through the door after the good smaller dog so fast I damned near whanged my guitar on the fence, and that slowed me up a little, but I was quick enough to see him go down the drive and up toward the house. He was making time. He was a flash and a flame, that damn' sweet old hound. The nigger saw him too, and come running up slantwise after me, and then I tore around a big tall clump of azaleas higher than my head and there was Bo, collared and captured.

He had his head in this lady's lap, and the lady was partly kneeling and laughing and looking around past Bo, with her fingers hooked in his collar and saying, "There, there . . ." She looked up when I came galloping. She was wearing gingham, kind of, shorts, and a little scrap of a thing across the top, and the way she was kneeling there on a patch of warm hot grass, I could see down past the scrap of thing and it looked like, to me, she didn't have anything on. It was just for that time of a second or so like looking at her naked. She had black hair that fell around her shoulders, and the shoulders themselves brown as the earth of a bank alongside a fresh-cut road.

Right then and in that very moment, even when I stopped and stood lunkering and panting, with her smiling up at me—damn, she had a pretty face—I thought of the song that's one of the best, "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair." I couldn't tell you why I thought it; not if I was put on witness for a year of days.

Then the old nigger come up behind us and right after him, like a boiling of Jubilee, come Hattram, with the strop doubled in one fist and his face afire. John come loping behind him and he looked kind of glad, like he was tickled the whole thing had happened. But he didn't say nothing, just that flick of a pleased look, and he stopped and stood alongside the nigger. Hattram came bulling up with the strop raised.

## CHAPTER IV

THE DOG Bo was laid out flat along the lady's lap with his nose nuzzling her belly, and Clint says, tight, "Let him go."

The lady looked up at Hattram with a funny kind of expression and says, "He's only feeling the spring."

"Let him loose," Hattram says, tighter than ever. The



lady slouched back and straightened up, leaving the dog half laying on the ground. Standing, she was only a little shorter than mé, and I could smell something about her that was like perfume but not like perfume either. Soon as she stood back Hattram leaned over and jerked the dog clean off the ground by the back legs and held him out, hanging there the way a beef carcass hangs head down in a butcher shop. He raised the strop again. It whistled and the dog let out a noise like a man being crucified. The whites of the dog's eyes showed up in pure little half-circles and his mouth went open, with this awful sound coming out. It was a sound you wouldn't want to think about hearing, or remember if you'd ever heard it once.

John, he was smiling; his eyes was glittery. The lady half turned away. I felt hot and heavy and like I was going to die inside. I don't know what the old nigger thought, if it was anything; his eyes didn't show. All this in the four or five seconds it took for Hattram to whale away half a dozen times with his strop.

Then, like it wasn't even me, I was around next to Hattram and laid a hand on his shoulder and dug in. He had good muscle. His eyes was screwed up and even stranger set than before. His teeth was gritted and he was breathing hard through them. I dug my nails in so the fingers cramped and I says—and it still wasn't like me saying it—right against his ear and loud over the whistling of the strop and the flat noise when it hit them black ribs, “Damn it, don't you want this hound?”

He stopped after a second; he dropped the arm with the strop. He was still breathing hard, but even. His eyes come a little further open. He took the hound and tossed him over to the old nigger, and the nigger caught him, kind of. The dog's tongue was out and the eye whites still showed, but he wasn't yelling now, just shaking heavy from nose to tail, hanging there in the nigger's arms. The nigger started off back down the driveway with him. The sun all at once felt quieter; Hattram looked sleepy and satisfied. I thought sudden, It was like he'd just give a woman his seed. He says, “Ay, what you say, boy?”

I dropped my hand from his shoulder. I says, “If you

don't want the hound, Mister Hattram, I'd be proud to take him from you."

The lady was watching now. Her lips was apart a little, and kind of pressed back against her teeth. They was the kind of lips were made to look soft, but they didn't now. And maybe her eyes was meant to have lights in them, but not that kind of hard burning. I couldn't help looking at her, even waiting for Hattram to answer me.

He says: "The son of a bitch won't ever be worth anything to you. He's rotten spoiled and so dumb he don't know a trail from a pan of mush. I ain't even going to try to enter him in the field trials at Grand Junction. He's out of Lady Brave by Whiffletree, and they were both champions. But this one is nothing but cheap bad blood. Make me an offer." He says all that smooth, almost in one breath.

I drew in my own breath. Things were happening pretty fast. I says, "Well, maybe I can't pay you all at once, but I got a regular job and if you'll accept something down, why—"

He kind of smiled. He had a small mouth and thin lips; not exactly a mean look, but not one I much liked either. He says: "I don't do business that way as a rule. How much you figure on putting down on him!"

I started to make a calculation. The pint of whisky had been a dollar forty-nine or something like that, and I'd need a little for spending money, but I figured I could spare . . . "Why, thirteen dollars or so is about all I got on me," I says. "I think I could fix to pay five, six a week until the bill was squared, though. I've lived around town all my life; lot of people know me. And, like I say, I got a steady job."

Hattram grinned. I could see he was enjoying himself. That give me little needles in my flesh, but I was thinking too hard of that hound to get riled. I thought how I would rub him with oil till them strop marks went away, and gentle him down for a long time. There wasn't nothing wrong with that hound except he was scared as hell. I would of been scared too, in his hide.

But Hattram, he was enjoying himself. He winked at the lady. She didn't wink back, and I liked her for that. Just kept looking steady at him, and at me.

"Well, that isn't a *princely* sum, now is it?" Hattram

says. "And how much you think the whole bill will be?"

I wanted to set him on his ass, but I wanted the dog more.

"Mister Hattram," I says, "I don't know. I know these hounds come high. I ain't trying to beat you down just because you say he's stupid."

"I appreciate that," he says, still grinning. "Well, suppose we step up there to the house and talk it over a spell. I just about made up my mind to get rid of him, so I'll give you a price. How much you say you had with you?"

"There's thirteen dollars I can spare right this minute, Mister Hattram."

"Hm-mm," he says, like some people do with kids, pretending to treat them like grownups. I don't rightly know how come Hattram couldn't seem to treat me man to man. Maybe he was that way with everybody, like he was trying to put himself above them somehow; or maybe it was something about me did it to him. For all I knew maybe he misliked me a whole hell of a lot, but I couldn't think of no good reasons why he should. Maybe just being there, and being me, was reason enough. I didn't know. I decided I wasn't going to let it fret me none.

He turned and we was all walking up the drive toward the house. The pile of noise that the hound had made seemed like it was still quivering around in the air. Hattram kept kneading and pulling at the strop while we walked along. The lady was wearing sandals, and they made a blurry noise on the gravel. She was behind me, and I heard her say to John, "Are you boys musicians?"

"No, ma'am," he says. "He's a musician; I just come along with him. He's a mighty good player and singer, ma'am."

She didn't answer. Even a couple yards ahead of her I could smell that smell of her. It was cool and at the same time bothering. I wouldn't have wanted it to go away, but it bothered me more than I cared to let on.

We went in through a door on a big gallery at the back, Hattram opening the door and me following and and then the lady and then John, him looking respectful and like he'd be holding his hat in his hands if he'd had a hat to hold; but I knew he wasn't feeling like that.

There was a bunch of deck chairs and garden chairs around, and the gallery floor was made of big red tiles. The white wall of the house itself was cool with shadows.

"I don't think I got your name," Hattram says.

I says, "Carp Rambo's my name, and my friend here is John." Hell, I told him my name down there. He was still acting some kind of game with me.

The lady says: "Boys, just sit down and I'll see about having something cool brought out. It's getting hot out there in that sun." I watched her walk to the door that led inside to the house itself. I couldn't help watching her. Damn, she moved smooth. Like a lady, but more than that. I remembered quick how I'd felt when I'd thought she was kneeling on the grass naked.

I swiveled around to Hattram. He was sitting half bent over a little dark green table, still fooling around with the strop. He was looking down at it and kept running his fingers along it. He says: "Well, I tell you, Rambo. I'll let you have the dog for thirteen dollars. With the proviso you'll keep your mouth shut about how much you paid for him. I don't want everybody coming out here and saying Hattram's dogs are going at a fire sale. See?"

He looked up. His blue eyes was still sleepy and satisfied. I knowed why he made it thirteen dollars; it wasn't so much a kind of generous thing as it was a scorning thing. But all the same it made me feel light and sudden-lucky inside.

I says, "That sure is a handsome offer, Mister Hattram." I could feel my heart knocking. It was big in me. Things was happening fast and wondrous for sure. But I says, and I couldn't help myself: "It ain't enough, and I sure wish you'd let me pay more than that, a little at a time. I can do it."

I don't reckon that would of pleased him, though. He had to whittle down my satisfaction all he could. Something was wrong with him the way it is with a horse when it won't go near the others in a pasture.

He looks at me and says slow: "No. I wouldn't have it on my conscience. I'd lay awake nights worrying about down-trading you." He grinned again when he said it, but hell, he'd never lay awake nights worrying about



anybody. Not anybody. Outside himself. He'd worry about that, all right.

But I couldn't get mad about anything—not now.

"All right, sir," I says. "I got the thirteen right here." John, he'd sat down in one of the big long padded chairs, and he was laying back a little. The chair padding made a sigh under him when he leaned back more in it. I scrabbled in my lumberjack pockets to lay my fingers on my money.

Hattram said: "My wife can make out the bill of sale and the papers and so on. It might be a good idea for her to jack up the price on the bill of sale so nobody can say I sold for that cheap."

"If you want to do that, that's fine," I says.

I was troubling him, all right. Something about me being there and buying the dog was troubling him; he was pulling up all the satisfaction he could pull, like water from a deep well. But I says to myself, Anything's all right, so's I get that dog. That Bo.

Hattram stood up. He stretched lazy and flipped the strop so it made a gentle little crack in the bright clear air. "Yeah. Well, I got to get downtown now. I'm late to the office. If you feel up to it, stop by some time and let me know how you make out with the animal."

"Sure, I'd be proud to do that," I says. Along with my heart knocking in me and high with luck was this other feeling—that everything might shatter and fall down and bust apart: like it was all a joke he was playing. I had the money out now, in a crumpled wad.

He sees it and he looks at it like it was something else—I don't know what—not money. "No, give that to my wife. She can always use a little more cash."

He flipped the strop between his hands again and then shook himself a little, screwing his mouth down like of a sudden he hadn't no use at all for this sunny place or his wife or the dogs or John or me or anything at all in the world. He nodded, cold. "Good luck with that hound." But he didn't mean it.

"I reckon I'll have pretty decent luck," I says.

He looks at me again, his eyes that funny way, light and cold and far off; then he nodded again and walked on off and inside the house, through the same door his wife had used.

It was just as fine as a biscuit with butter on it, in the sun when he left. There wasn't any noise except the push of a little wind through the trees around the house. John was leaning stretched back in the chair now like he'd been hit with an ax. He says, "Don't that take the blue-bird off the bushes, now."

I almost wanted him to hush up. It was like breaking a spell or something, to talk.

I nodded.

"Hey," John says soft. He was laying looking up at a stripe of sun that was right across his eyes like a white mask. "What you think of that wife of his? Damn me . . ." He says it kind of awed and low and held just to ourselves.

"I was studying about the hound mainly," I says. "This was a day of pure luck for me. You know that?"

"Damned right I know that", he says, still soft. "I'm a lucky stone for you to carry around."

Yes, I guessed he was; I guessed it was all right for him to think so. But that sure wasn't the way I'd meant it. He hadn't done nothing but fuss around and shove me places. But if he wanted to think that he was the one caused the luck, that was all right. I didn't argue him.

I sat there, and in them minutes, quiet there on the gallery, I thought how it would be to take that proud hound in to Suzy Ellen. My God above. I felt like I wanted to jump up and cut a wing and caper, but not like that either—just holding everything in myself, so, quiet and thin-shelled as an egg, and tall and simple. And then I wasn't thinking about the hound. I was thinking about Hattram's wife. I've seen a lot of ladies but never one like her.

John, he was smoking a cigarette that he'd took out of a box on the table beside his chair. The smoke curled up in easy question marks in the air. I hummed a little tune back of my tongue and in the top of my throat. Life was just stretching out ahead like a lane you thought once you'd go down in summer and some way missed; and now here it was again, and now you were going.

John's eyes was closer shut now and he was looking at me when I glanced up. "This the life," he says. "Lay here and put on hog fat all day long; rassle yourself out

to give the hounds a walk when you feel like it; jump in bed with that—”

He stopped; she was standing there in the door. She had her sandals off and was standing there barefoot. Behind her a nigger girl, young and smiling and looking cool in a black uniform and a white cap, was holding a tray with a bottle of whisky and some other bottles and glasses on it. There was ice cubes in a bowl, too.

She came on out, quiet, with that good walk of hers. She stooped a little over the table and her hair brushed down off her shoulders, and she says, “Just set them down here, Phronsie.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Phronsie says. She laid the tray and the drinks and things down easy as a kitten lighting on soft ground. Then she straightened and went back, trim, through the door and on into the house.

Mrs. Hattram says, “I’m glad you’re going to get the dog.”

She looked at me. Some way it was like she’d said more than what she’d said.

“Thanks, ma’am,” I says. “I’m glad too. I don’t know how I could be any happier about it.”

“I’ll make out the papers in a little while,” she says, still standing there. Then she looked over at John; he was laying still, with the cigarette sending up smoke from his fingers, and his eyes like live coals.

None of us said anything more for a second or so. The wind passed through the leaves around the house. She wasn’t a whit embarrassed about not making talk.

“I think I’ll have a drink too,” she says finally. “Branch water or soda or coke for you two?”

“Just plain for me,” I says. There was a bottle of bourbon and one of scotch on the tray.

“Me too,” John says from the chair. “And bourbon.”

“Bourbon for me too,” I says.

She bent over the table with the tray on it and made the drinks. I didn’t know where to look. If I looked at her, and it seemed like I couldn’t help looking at her, like there was a string that kept yanking me around to look at her, why, I was scared she’d look up and see me looking that way. And I knew the way I was looking, all right. And if I looked at John he’d just be laying there with that little smile and them eyes like they knew all about

me, and by hell, they didn't. I set on the edge of the chair leaning forward. I guess I was sweating some. The glasses went clink and clink, and then she was putting one in my hand. Straight bourbon with ice in it.

"Thank you, ma'am," I says.

She leaned there to me for a second. "Ellen is my name," she says straight to me.

Her smell was all around me and her face was close. I said, "I'm Carp Rambo, and over there is John."

She moved around then, turning, and says, "Hello, then—John," and laughed a' little. Down the drive a good distance come the sound of an engine starting and a rush of gravel under the tires. I guessed that was Hattram going off. It was about eleven o'clock of the morning, and that seemed like a fine lazy time to get to your office. I said to myself I wish my daddy'd been a Senator. But it didn't seem very important that my daddy was just a good man, and a singing man, and I was glad in a little more honest way that I was me.

The drink tasted fine. It sat on top of the others and just smiled. This Ellen wasn't sitting very far away. She had mighty fine legs. It was so fine being there I couldn't even let myself think too strong about her legs. There had been something in her eyes you couldn't name if you had all the words, all the songs ever made, when she leaned over me. It was still there. Like a bird bubbling along. No, deeper: like a river.

She raised her glass and says, "Here's to Bo," and I lifted mine, and John, from the chair where he sprawled, lifted his. We drank.

Her eyes kind of burned into mine like the devil and like angels singing too, and every one of them angels right on the note without a waver off, singing it true and skilled.



## CHAPTER V

JOHN LAID THERE like a turtle, that sleepy. But underneath I could feel him awake as a lizard that will move faster than any hand. I knowed he was listening and figuring and laughing inside even when he didn't say anything. It was just the lady, this woman, Ellen, and me that talked. When I had half the new drink down I could feel I was getting a little loose, the way enough drinks do you. Not sloppy; but loose and easy and free.

She says: "Please take your jacket off. You look so hot."

"Well, ma'am," I says, and, "Ellen," she says, and I says: "That's my old woman's name. Suzy Ellen. I always liked it for a nice name." And I lifted the guitar off by the sling, standing up to do it, then took off the lumberjack and folded it atop the guitar and lay them both beside my chair. She just sat and watched me. Her skin was as smooth as velvet, light brown, real good velvet, like it was a kind of sun itself and give out a good deal of warmth. There was lights in her brown eyes, but not burning any more, not that hard way leastwise, and there was a lot of quick winking lights in the black hair lying warm and living along her shoulders.

The light come in from the side onto the gallery like an old long wisdom everybody forgets about until they watch it a while.

She says: "I like the name Ellen myself. It sounds like a little bell ringing."

By damn, it did sound like that, now she pointed it out so.

She says, "Will you have another drink?" to John, and he grunts and lifts himself up a little and she laughs and says, "Don't get up; it's right here." He sure drank that one fast, I thought, and he had been hitting that swiped fifth too. He must be getting pretty busting drunk inside. He sure didn't show it. His eyes was about shut. I would of give a deal to have him somewheres else. He took the drink and went to work on it right away and says a soft

"Thanks," and the lady didn't answer or maybe didn't hear him.

I says, "Ellen," and it wasn't like my old woman's name at all, some way; it was lighter and a little scared and puffy on the air. "I'm sure real glad to have that dog Bo. I can't tell you why I'm so glad, or how, and I couldn't if I lived to be a hundred 'n' tried every day of it. But I'm glad. He's just the dog I was looking for."

"Well," she says, holding the glass with her brown fingers curled around it like she was holding something valuable, "I'm very glad he's getting you."

"That's a mighty nice way to put it. And it was mighty fine of Mister Hattram to let me have him that cheap."

"No," she says, kind of sharp and looking down at the sun squares on the tiles. "He should have given him to you. He should have given him away long ago. He shouldn't ever have owned Bo in the first place."

That was a funny thing to say even if it was true. I thought about that a little.

"Well, I'll treat him fine, fine as I can," I says. "He'll have a good home and he can hunt a good bit too, when he's a mind to."

She looked up. "That's what he needs: hunting and affection, and somebody with pride in him, and love."

She looked down again, and for a whole long time she just stared at the tiles, only not like she was seeing them. Then she says, low, "Every human being alive needs that."

It kind of got to me. I didn't know exactly what she meant, but even if I didn't, right then, I knew I would later on, when I thought about it some. It was something you'd want to think about, floating it around your mind close and slow, at night when it seems there's all the time in creation to mull things over in. The way she'd said it was sad. Not crying sad; old sad. And that's one of the worst ways to be saddened. There was a creamy little line, no wider than a string, where she parted her hair plumb in the middle and it looked straight and neat, like she'd been at pains to get it so. Suzy Ellen's was apt to be kind of saw-toothed, times.

When she looks at me again her eyes are gayer, like she was putting that sadness off to one side for a while. I didn't reckon that whatever this Ellen done she would

ever blame other people too much, or much out loud. She wasn't much like my old woman even if their names was somewhat alike. Suzy Ellen, she'd rare back and lash out at the world, full of salt and fire, if ever things went sour on her. And she'd aim to let everybody in three counties know just how she felt. But this Ellen, I had the idea right then that she fought different things and in different ways—all of it deep inside herself and never letting on none. Well, they was both women, and maybe that was all you could say about it.

We was leaning back in our chairs and looking at each other lazy-like, but some way nothing lazy about it at all, and she says, "Where do you play?"

"Magnolia Bar, ma'am. It's down on Dauphin. I really just start there tonight."

"Oh? Do you play with a band?"

"No, ma'am—Ellen, I mean," I says. "I never did play with a band. I sing and I play the guitar and just—well, my job is to amuse the customers."

"I see. And how long have you been singing and playing, Carp?"

"Lord, ma'am—Ellen—ever since I was about as high as the legs of this here chair. My daddy taught me when I was just a little shaving."

"That's wonderful," she says. "You talk about it as though it were—a horse you were riding, or a hound you were hunting with."

"Well," I says, "I guess that's the way I feel about it." I took a drink.

"What are the songs you sing?"

"Well, the old ballads, and some of the newer ones, but not many of them. You know—a bait of old songs everybody knows. Except sometimes they're let go into time and get lost. They're just—well, they're just songs," I says. I never thought how to explain songs before. You really can't, I expect.

I don't know what got into me, but there's a feeling you have when people—and not many people do this way—when people seem to know what you're built out of. The feeling makes you want to reach out to them. If she'd been man or beast or anything in between, and not a fine-looking woman at all, I'd have had the same feeling.

I says, "Here's a song like I sing."

Maybe it was the drinks, too. Anyway, I picked up the guitar. I strummed it a smidgeon and then I sang her the "Borreens of Derry." I guess that's one of the oldest songs in the world. It came out of Ireland on a tossing ship and stayed alive amid sickness and death. I went from the Borreens right into the "Glendy Burke," and that's another sweet one. And then I could feel the drink lighting me up inside and the sun doing the same on the outside, and maybe her eyes, looking at me there in the sun, had something to do with it too. John, he had his eyes all the way shut; maybe the second drink she'd give him had gone and set down on the tiles.

I sang "The Song of Twelve." That's the one about the apostles of Jesus, and it's a tune that cleaves to the roof of your mouth and comes out rushing and wild and lovely as sin in a haystack and yet full of all the world's power, and innocent as a white lamb newly born. "The Song of Twelve."

I was singing pretty good.

I laid the guitar down again beside the chair after that one.

"That's the kind of songs I sing, Ellen," I says.

She was leaning forward. Her eyes was shining. She says, "I didn't know—" She got up and came across to me, and I stood up too, partly because it seemed polite.

"Carp Rambo," she says, "that was one of the most beautiful things I ever heard." She looked at me. "I didn't know your songs were like that." She touched my hand, just brushed it across the knuckles. It was like being brushed by a torch. The shine in her eyes was almost tears. And right then I knew it was true about her knowing me. She had known what I was built of, and now she knew better. I could never say it out the way I felt about this woman, this Ellen. It was something you could hear only in a song and then only between the words and the beats of the chords and the silence after the song is finished. It was like that, loving and peaceful and grieving a little. But it was hot, too, and flaring, with a big wild center like the middle of the world aflame.

All of that was in me, but all I could say was, "Well, I'm glad you liked them, Ellen. It makes me proud when somebody does."

I looked over at John, past her shoulder. He was



stretched out and breathing deep. Maybe he was asleep, but I thought I could feel him awake. We just stood there and then, slow, she turned and walked back, and she moved like a slow rain on a river. When she's back by the table she says, "Another drink?" and I says, "I guess I better not, Miz Ellen."

"Ellen," she says, kind of sharp and clear, but laughing too.

"Ellen," I says.

"All right. Carp."

"See, we was doing a little drinking before we come, to celebrate the new job, and I want to be on my legs when I show up there tonight."

"I won't have any more either. Come on in," she says, "and I'll give you the bill of sale. How are you going to get Bo home? Did you drive?"

"No, ma'am," I says. "Ellen!" We both laughed. "We come here by bus." I leaned over and got the wad of money I'd put back in my lumberjack after Mister Clint Hattram had told me to give it her. I thought of what he'd said about giving it to his wife because she could always use it. It seemed a meaching thing to say. I straightened up: "I reckon we can thumb a ride back."

"With a dog you won't stand a very good chance," she says. "No, I'll drive you back."

"We sure thank you," I says.

"Your friend's asleep."

"He's got a little load on, I guess," I said.

"This way, Carp." I followed her into the house.

It was nice walking behind her into the cool of the house, with her legs showing brown and clean against the dark around us. It was a house you'd build if you had all the money there was and plenty of time to satisfy yourself the builders was giving you all the room your soul needed. It was simple, too, not becluttered up with china and things; there was big rugs and fireplaces here and there and one room opening out from another, and sometimes a step going up, or down, into the next one, like so many boxes to fill with contentment. Now that was a thing. The whole house, the spread of it, was made for contentment, but there wasn't much peace you could feel in it. It was like it was waiting to be lit with something and had almost give up. But it had a soft clean smell.

Ellen walked ahead of me. She said, "Down this way," and turned, and I followed her along a hall. In a mirror I could see a maid dusting in the next room. This maid was a big fat one with a broad butt, bending over dusting and dabbing, and not exerting herself much, at the legs of a tiny piano in there. It wasn't the one Ellen had called Phronsie. The wood paneling of the hall was light and clear; it looked like pine but I reckon it was something harder than Southern pine, which is more hollowy and doesn't give off that rich sheen.

Ellen stopped and opened a door. "Come in," she says. "I keep the papers in here."

It was a bedroom. You wouldn't think so at first because it was so big. There was a fireplace at one side and next to that was a desk the same red-brown color as her eyes, and around on one side there were three pictures of ladies in dance skirts, you know, those little ones that pinch at their bellies and then puff out like bells swinging, and they were fixing straps on their dancing shoes or bent in ducklike positions talking to one another, or just standing in a white stage light. I like them pictures and I never did find out who painted them.

The ceiling was dark wood, the way the walls in the hall were, but a little more darkling than that. The bed was low and set right up against the wall with a kind of bookcase arrangement fanning out from both sides of it so's you could lay there and flip on a light that was in the bed head and pick out any book you wanted without hardly stretching your arm. The books looked gay and not like in the bins out in front of the secondhand bookstores on Dauphin. They made a splash of color that made you glad to see.

I was feeling uneasy and at the same time I didn't want to be anywhere else I could think of. Not anywhere on earth, anyway.

Ellen walked over to the desk and lifted up a pile of papers and started riffling through them, her fingers going fast. Some women's hands don't look like they're good for much except to be women's hands. Hers weren't like that. They were square and the fingers were strong, and I liked to watch her riffling through those papers. I just stood there. A dot of light got in and fell on the face of one of

the dancing ladies in the pictures and made her cheek-bone look bone-white.

It was real quiet and you could feel how far away from everybody else in creation you were.

I could hear my heart. It wasn't going very fast but it was going deep.

Ellen says, "Did you ever think of making a real career of your singing, Carp?" She was half turned away from me, still going through the papers. "You could, you know."

"I don't know," I says, and my own voice sounded deep down as my heart. I didn't mean it to sound so. "Maybe I could, but there's a mort of satisfaction in just living in the same old town I've knowed all my life, and doing the same old things."

"Yes, I guess there is. I guess there's satisfaction in just singing the way you sing, too. Do you—" She straightened and she was holding a couple of papers. I guessed they were the papers that went with Bo along with the bill of sale. Tell the truth, I wasn't thinking too much about Bo right then. There was something went on under what we said with our mouths. "Do you get along? I mean—"

"Yes, I get along. I always have. The Rambos is pretty hard to kill."

She smiled. The corners of her mouth went up a trifle and then sagged down and trembled. We stood still, looking way into each other's eyes. I thought, She's scared too, the way I am. I thought, I'm a married man and there ain't a person going to say I don't admire and love Suzy Ellen. But it was like somebody saying it way off, dim, at one end of a tunnel, and me standing here at the opposite end.

We weren't standing but a couple of inches apart. Even without looking I could see down inside the middle of that little scrap of gingham she wore, and it was like a soft warm valley there. I could tell how beautiful the rest of it I couldn't see must be. Her breath was coming quick and shallow, and even though I couldn't hear it, it seemed to fill the room.

Then, like a little breath of mist moving in the quiet room, she says soft: "Damn you, Carp Rambo. If you hadn't sung for me . . ."

She stepped up close to me, quick-moving, and put her

arms around me. When I felt her arms go around me-and when her face came up I thought, whatever is happening has got to happen. Her mouth was wide and fine on mine and hot inside and her eyes was shut and I felt crazy and carried off like I'd been scooped up and lifted. Next thing, she had stepped back and the little silly gingham things was on the floor and I was right about her being beautiful all over. I was right about everything I hadn't let myself think too much about. It was something a lot would've said had no right to happen, but there's some things you don't stop—they are just like part of the bigness of breathing. And we were on the bed, and then it was too late for any stopping. And nobody, nobody at all, whatever they thought, was going to say yea, nay, or in between.

When it was over, we lay there on the bed, not talking and not quite touching. I don't know how long it was we stayed like that until she says, soft as fine wool when you put your fingers through it, "Are we still going to be friends?"

I says, soft and the same, beside her: "We sure certain are. I reckon I'm sorry, and at the same time I know I'm glad."

"You love your wife, Carp."

"Yes, Ellen," I says. "I do. I don't aim to do her no hurt. I've horsed around a good many women, the way a man does, but I think more'n I can say of Suzy Ellen. She's got spunk and she knows me well. And there's other reasons I think a good deal of her, too."

It wasn't hard to say them things. It was like I was talking to myself. A whore wouldn't have said what Ellen had said. The sun laced in those side windows through some vines and laid on her skin like big yellow oblong grapes. I petted her slow.

We was both just basking and purring like a couple of lions in the sunlight.

I said: "You don't have to worry what I think of you, neither. Or about being friends or anything like that. I think a good trusting deal of you, too. Even if I don't know you the way I know Suzy Ellen, there's a whale of a lot don't have to be mouthed around, between us. I don't think you're a whore or anything. I think you're sad



and kind of mixed up. I think you had to have what I gave you, and it was like I had to have it myself."

I laid there thinking a little. Her breath buzzed against my ear. It was a sweet breath. Hell, I wasn't worried about anybody coming in. I was just cool and relaxed, and the world felt ripe and clean.

I thought what a funny world it was, and how not so long ago I was standing on Government corner at Royal, and how this was a whole different world, but how the two of them had mixed and both spun along together. The bed was soft. I petted her and smoothed her.

After a minute she said: "I could be bad for you, Carp. I've been half a fake so damned long . . ."

"Things like that aren't anything to fuss your mind about," I says. "We met each other and here we are. That's kind of a blessing and it's all we need."

"Yes," she says, after another minute or so. "All we need. You may not even want me to tell you, but I will: I've never been unfaithful to Clint. I've thought about things, and thought I might be unfaithful some time. But I didn't intend this."

I could tell, being this way with her, this close, with that smell so cool and fair and like the sun on leaves, that she wasn't a remorseful woman. She was like part of me that had always been there without me quite knowing it, and I hoped right up to Heaven it always would.

There's some women like that that mix with your blood. Like a wine that mixes with you, a kind you never had but some way always knew. Not many of them. But there ain't a question of forgetting about them when they come along. They can drive you wild if you're fool enough to let them be bitches. Some of them don't have any bitch in them. I figured Ellen didn't.

She rolled close against me, and it was like being a kid again and letting the sun beat on you and swallow you. You could let it, and not think but just be.

I felt so glad for the both of us there, whispering and happy, that I could feel sorry for Hattram. Just sorry he couldn't see what he had here. It would be a marvel of a lustrous world if men could all understand each other as close as a man and a woman do, with no words spoke aloud, a time like that. It would be a singing joy.

Later, though, she stirred and turned away. I thought

maybe she was crying, but she wasn't. She said: "No. I'm a bitch. I could say I love you, but I've said that before. I don't want to say it to you too."

Jerusalem's bells, I thought, stilly and cool, that was a crazy thing to say. And then, like reaching back in time and seeing something awful clear: Suzy couldn't say that. It was a wrong thing, all wrong. Because you got to love whoever you make love to. Really, or it's nothing, it's less than a little dust.

I couldn't think of one single thing to say, just lay there feeling hollow and chill, like the sun had been snapped off. Then it come to me that maybe she couldn't say she loved me because she did. And because saying it when she hadn't meant it had spoiled it for now. I reached out and touched her, light, on the shoulder. "Ellen."

She rolled back to me sudden and was close again, cool-hot and strong, deep and bright against me again. And the sun shimmered on her skin and warmed me. We went slow, like forever, like dying and living both bound up together in one split smattering of time—the kind of time you couldn't measure in minutes or years. And I knew I was right about her. It wasn't in nature for her not to mean it. Or to feel unhappy. Or be anything but purely glad, all over, and over and over again and not stopping.

And everything again close and quick and bright, a singing joy.

## CHAPTER VI

I FELT COOL AND hollow as an old fence post that's stood up so long the inside of it's gone and yet the light is still heavy around it, smoothing its outside, and it's part of the ground it's sunk in. My backbone felt that way, all relieved and cool and light, yet hot in the sun. We stepped out on the back gallery; from the way the sun lay on the

floor I'd say it was growing into two o'clock or thereabouts. We was like two kids standing there feeling happy and solemn, and it was all I could do to keep from reaching out and touching her. But I didn't. I didn't want to take a chance on John seeing. He was still laid out flat with his feet up on that long couch of a chair almost as high as his head, with one arm dangling to the tile alongside him. His head was tipped to one side and he was breathing like a rough wind cosseting through the tops of pines. I reckoned he was full asleep, but I didn't want to chance it, so I stood away from her, a couple of feet.

She says: "I'll go get the car. You wake him up and bring him around the side."

We looked at each other. She looked the way I felt, with all the creases smoothed out and stroked away. Her eyes were bright but not burning. I thought, watching her now, how she was like new cream, only firmer, under that little skimp of rag she wore and how she went down in slow curves, like rivers and valleys, and how she knew how to love with her whole self in it, the way a dolphin plays or a sailfish rises to water when he strikes, going all the way up and aiming toward the sky. She knew what I was thinking. She smiled at me like a kiss. John's snoring shivered the air and rasped around the day like the noise of a big drunk bee. If bees get drunk. She went out the door to the gallery, slow and lazy, and she hummed a little song that wasn't anything special but light and clear. She was a flower walking alive through sun. If flowers sing. I got a notion they do. She had put on her sandals again, and it was pleasurable to watch her walking away and just stand, not quite thinking about her but soaking in the light, and knowing she was part of the light.

I picked up my lumberjack and my guitar and slung the guitar on, scrooching around with my shoulders to get it set right, and folded the lumberjack over my arm. I went across and leaned over John. The bottle he'd been drinking from didn't have much more than a large smell left in it. I laid hold of his shoulder and shook. He says, "Whaagh," and I shook harder. He came awake then, grinning silly, and he says, "Carp, you long-legged old bastard." He didn't say it too plain. But I still couldn't tell

was he putting on or not. I guess I never would be sure with John Virgin.

I says: "Come on, she's going to give us and the hound a lift downtown. You need some food in you. You drink all that bourbon?"

He squinted over at the table where the bottles were and where the ice cubes had melted leaving a bowl full of warm soup in the sun.

"Be dog if I didn't," he says. He comes out of the chair wobbly and heaves himself across to the little table and stands there not too certain on his legs and lifts up the yellow bowl full of warm water and glugs it down. "Araghh," he says. "My throat feels like it's a home for bugs. That's better. Hell. Can't hardly stand up. Help me walk, Carp."

I says, "All right, lean on me." So we clomped our way through the back gallery door and out around the side. Me, I was clearheaded as a new deacon. It was good out there with the shadows different along the drive and striping different on the house and leaping at you from the trees; and the light simmering around the flowers like they were sprouting in your brain. The sky was blue as blue. Here comes a noise from the drive behind us, and it's the old nigger we met first, crunching up the gravel and leading Bo at the end of a silvery-shiny chain snapped into a black collar. Bo doesn't want to come too much but he's moving, and his steps are clean and neat on the gravel like he's too good for it. John sways against me and I says: "Pull up, now; hold together, son. We got just a little more way. We get in the wagon there, hold your damn' head out the side so's the air'll get to you."

"Don't need air, I need sleep. Hell!" John moans.

She was waiting with one of the station wagons, the newer one. It was a nice little bus. She had the back of it open, and the nigger, he clucks in his throat and says, "Hoo, honey, now step up here." Bo stood with the chain tight and backed a little way. He whined. The whites of his eyes was ready to show. The fur stood up in a little ridge on the back of his spine. Part of him was black as midnight. There was welts along the black sheen of his flanks and sides. Up around his chest, where he was a little white, there was a place looked like a new scar. That bastard Hattram, I thought. But the nigger was



good with him. The nigger says: "Honey, you just come this way if you won't come the other. Young gentleman going to give you good home, lot of pan gravy. Ain't that right, sir?"

I says, "That sure is right." I kind of dumped John into the station wagon and he slumped down on the seat and I says to Ellen, who had come around to the back, "John, he's got hold of some bad ice or something," and she smiles. I went to Bo around at the back and kneeled down beside him. I reached out and stroked his ears. I could feel him pull a little away from my fingers. The nigger stood there holding the leash. I touched Bo light as I'd touched Ellen a while ago. I says to him: "It ain't going to be so bad; we got a sight of getting along to do, the next ten, twelve, fifteen years. Come on now, don't be a backup hound."

I could see the nigger's eyes under the shade of his old felt hat. They was narrow and considering and at the same time kindly disposed. I figured him for a real hound man. You take some like that, they can tell exactly what a hound's thinking. Hound knows it, too.

I kneeled there cupping Bo's head in my hands. It was a clever head. A coon hound isn't like any other dog, he's closer to man than most; he don't rove quartering the way a bird dog does, but when he finds a trail he starts to whoop in his chest and with his heart busting and his legs carrying him freer than a bird straight toward the quarry. He is at one and the same time, I would say, more shut of civilization and more depending on man than most any other animal. Bo was trembling under my hands, but it wasn't a trembling you could see. I kept smoothing and stroking and says, "Here, take a step." He sniffs at my hands when I let loose of his head. The fur goes down closer along his spine. The inside of his ear is pink and bright in the sun. I can see Ellen's legs to one side and a little behind me. I think how I like those legs and how good they feel and how honestly peaceable and glad and awake I am. The dog comes another step, and then I move on up to the back of the station wagon. "Come on, Bo," I says easy.

The nigger handed the chain to me. It had a piece of crossbar steel in the end so's you could tie him up easy to whatever was handy, and I give a little lift on it, and Bo,

he jumps up, pretty as you please, into the wagon. I looped the end of the chain around a steel hook by a side window and drew it up tight. The nigger was standing there at the back of the wagon when I jumped down and shut the door, and when I'm going around to the front, he says, "Mister—"

"Yeah," I says.

He makes like to take hold of my sleeve. "Mister, my name's Old Bubba. That's what everybody around here calls me. Any time anything go wrong with that there dog, you come to Old Bubba and he fix him up. Won't cost nothing."

"Why, that's right nice," I says.

"Yessir. You just come right along and ask Old Bubba. I like that dog."

"Yes," I said. "You hate to see him go, don't you, Bubba?"

He bends close and whispers so even Ellen can't hear. I can see her face brown in the sun just beyond. She knows just about what he's saying. There's something about the nigger and about her that's alike. Like they knew a secret together.

"Naw, sir. I glad to see him go. I glad you gittin' him. You come back now, anything go wrong."

"I will," I says. "And thanks, Bubba, hear?"

He nods and steps back. His eyes is washed out, but tough and wary and kind. I think there's a power of sight in them even if he is an old man. Bo is sitting up straight, not too trusting, but all the same, I guess, glad to see me when I crawl in the door over John. I shove John aside with my hips, scrooching and pushing, and he leans farther out the window, and I says, "You ain't going to be sick, are you?"

"Naw," he says. "But I ain't well, neither."

"That's all right," I says. "You make a pig of yourself, you got to take the slop in your guts just like any pig."

"Ah, hell," he says, and he leans way out the window.

Ellen had got in the other side. She started the engine and we rolled back down the driveway. There was a place where you could back so far and then curve forward around an old mimosa tree that had a trunk like an elephant's hide, only darker and even more weathered. Its leaves dripped shadow and sun over the hood, and I

felt fine. Bo, he swayed a little but stayed sitting up and didn't look back or whine but kind of stretched to me, and I eased the guitâr around so I could lean back and put an arm over the seat and touch him, kind of, on the shoulder. As we went down the drive I glanced back and saw Old Bubba standing there looking after us. It was too dark under his felt hat now for me to see his eyes.

The Mary B. Austin School up alongside Spring Hill was out, it being after two, and the kids was waiting for the bus when we come by. They were jumping around and wrestling, and some had red sweaters on and some blue and some green and they all looked like a lot of things gone crazy-happy in the sun. The air flowed in the side windows and Bo sat still, not even quivering any more. Oh, it was a handsome time. Ellen's smell was all around me, sweet and cool and secret as a shady woods. John Virgin leaned out the window on the other side like a sack of turnips. She was a good driver, not like most women, taking forever to make up their minds and then maybe making it up all wrong, but acting like she knew where she was going and how to go about getting there and not ripping the gears. The engine purred. She says, looking straight ahead, "Do you want to go downtown, or to your home?"

I says: "I think maybe we better go all the way downtown. If I was to leave John now he might get himself in trouble."

She nods. "All right. Get him something to eat, and he'll be all right."

"Yes, that's what I figure," I says. We couldn't say anything but that kind of easy polite talk because of John sitting there. But it didn't matter; we didn't have to talk. I turned a little so I could see her better. I kept looking for something that would show plain the kind of woman she was. She'd made out like she was a bad woman, but I never did think that. She was just woman. She looked healthy and quiet and full of a hidden swimming kind of thing. The sun splashed over her hair, her face, her eyes. You ever watch a woman carrying a baby—looked at her real close? There's a mystery of sunlight in them; they don't even think much what they're saying, what they do; they know something a man ain't never going to know.

Well, she was like that now. I thought of those kids waiting for the bus and what a wonder a kid is. It would be fine if Suzy Ellen and me could have a lot of them, but it didn't look like anything was going to happen. I reckon, though, if we did have any I'd even play and sing hill-william style. I sure do like kids. I like to watch them. I like to watch them the way I liked to watch her sitting there, driving, with just the little stepping motion on the brake, or reaching for the clutch, when we went down Old Shell Road, making a ripple of muscle along her thigh. He legs were clean and fined up the way a race horse's are, but smoother, of course, and gentler, and womany.

The wind fingered her hair, and I wanted to touch it too, but I didn't. John, he wasn't making motion one, just slumped there. I wondered if he was asleep again. We come down off the hill and hit all the bumps there are in Old Shell, but light and flickering; she really was a good driver.

She says, like we'd been talking about it all the time: "I used to visit Spring Hill when I was a little girl. I used to come out with my daddy. That was when they had the streetcar line. It was a right exciting place to go. I guess I was a little bewitched by it; I always wanted to live there when I was grown up."

I sure wanted to touch her.

She says, "It isn't so strong now, but sometimes I feel the same enchantment."

I says, "This is one of those days, ain't it?"

She nods, careful, still looking straight ahead.

"I'd like to drop in and listen to you sing at the Magnolia sometime, if that's all right with you."

"Sure," I says. "You know where it is?"

"Yes. Any time?"

"Sure, any time."

Her saying that made the flutter in my belly again. That was good. Some way, we hadn't made any plans or anything like that. It had been just something that had happened and we'd took it that way. But I was glad to hear her making plans. I wished I could have a lodge some place like the rich ones do, where I could do all the cooking, and hunt for the table, and keep the place right for her. Where we could be together in the wonder of the



nights, alone and together. It was funny, how bad I wanted to do things for her. She knew all this; it didn't have to be talked. But it was exciting and clear as a path opening out wider ahead, to hear her make plans like that.

I didn't touch her at all—just kept the wanting to inside me—and pretty soon we were in the downtown traffic and turning to the right past the big appliance stores on the corner of Broad there near Dauphin and then left on Government. Government Street when you come into it from that way is at its best. The trees are live oaks old as the town itself, and they lean out over the street so that if you were a bird all you'd see below is that crêpey roof of green, living green, stretching for blocks. The sun on the buildings is soft as petals or a woman's breast. You can travel a hell of a way and never come across anything like it. I was always proud of the town, coming in from that side, not that I wasn't proud of the town anyway. It was the kind of town that could soak up a lot of living, and lots of different kinds of living, too, making everybody that lived in it feel comforted and welcome, and like he lived right in the middle of it, wherever he lived.

Bo's shoulder was as still and firm as it ought to be, and the bones beneath felt like they was warm and solid. John was the same awkward sack out the window. A patch of sun the shape of a plate sat in Ellen's lap when we stopped for a light, and I looked at her and says, soft and just to her: "I'll be looking for you to come around. I'll really be looking for it."

Maybe I shouldn't of said that. My own daddy, he was a man smaller than me and he had five children, and hell knows they're scattered all over the map. But him and me was close, we done a sight of hunting and fishing and singing together. And when I was just beginning to feel the itch for a woman, or a lot of women, he said to me: "Carp, you might could get in trouble the way you're doing; but mind one thing: mind you never get to depend on any woman. Don't promise nothing; just give them what they want. Let them come to you if they're so minded. But don't you get to needing a woman and go running to her. You do that, you're never your own man again."

Course, I had forgot what Daddy said when I hitched

up with Suzy Ellen; that was a time after Daddy'd been in the ground, in a lot down near the Chickasabogue River. But maybe he was right. Maybe what he was trying to tell me was to stay lonesome and not try to soak in somebody else's lonesomeness so's not to be lonely any more—that that only doubled the freight of lonesomeness. But it was going against nature, anyway my nature, not to cotton up to somebody who cottoned to me. Yet I knew what he meant. Suzy Ellen had claim on me and now this Ellen maybe had claim. If a man could stay like a hawk in the air or a hare on the ground and never get himself mixed up with these claiming ways, if a man could just be on earth and breathe in air, and love every woman and every man too without no claiming . . .

But I'd said it and there wasn't no going back. And I wasn't a bit sorry for it.

We went on down to Royal past the tunnel, where the cars was still plunging down into it and being spit up out, steady and skimming. We turned left on Royal, and you could see the sun wink on the yellow sludgy water of the river. The air was deep afternoon and warm as soft fur to your face, and the shadows of the buildings was edged by that steep light. The people on the sidewalks walked slow, a lot of them, a whole crowd. Being with her made the whole day different. Everything I saw was like it had been washed newer and stood out sharp. I had thought, passing the white glaring library back on Government, it would be nice going in there with her and maybe she could pick me out some good books. And I had thought, passing other places, it would be nice to eat a hamburger with her at one of the joints, or walk along with her looking at the pawnshops, or go with her to that Mexican Gift Shop down under the old La Clede Hotel. Anything, with her. But I couldn't quite shake off what my daddy had said. There was a true tale in its saying.

Part of me wanted to see Suzy Ellen, too, and was getting het up to show her Bo. Now, maybe there's some would say it was wrong to be thinking of Suzy Ellen right then, after all the thinking about Ellen I'd been doing, and after what we'd done together that day, unless the thinking of her was loaded down with a weight of shame and meanness. Well, I just didn't feel ashamed or mean at all. The truth was, and you can call it what you want,

but I felt fine. And the two of them, side by side in my head like that, was both part of the same good feeling. Maybe it *was* wrong, but it come over me, you give one of them blind beggars a dime and it makes him happy; if you give him another dime I don't see what call he has to feel sad or low-down.

Ellen stopped the wagon on Royal and we got out, John moving by himself now but still moaning a little, and when I had Bo out on the paving and stood there just for a mutter of time, holding the chain and looking in the window of the wagon over across at her behind the wheel, I thought, why don't they make the world so a man don't have to bother his head so much? So everybody's kind and can love who they want? I wanted to be in bed with her, and so did she, and why couldn't a thing like that be simple and easy and right?

She raised one of those nice brown square hands a little. "I'll be dropping in."

"You do that, Ellen," I says.

Then she was gone, lost in the quick noisy traffic. I wondered how come everything else could go on looking the same. When it wasn't.

"Come on, for Pete's sake," John says from the sidewalk. "My belly thinks my throat's cut."

"Well," I says, bringing Bo up closer to my knee, "I'm kind of hungry myself."

He looks at me and his black eyes gleam. "I bet you are for a fact," he says.

There wasn't anything a man could make of that to take offense to, but I didn't like it and I wondered how much he knew. Oh, hell, I didn't care. It was so pleasant walking down Royal, away from Government in the reddish slow-latening sun, and I'm not a man to worry over-much about the next move. It will come; in spite of what my daddy said, there ain't any way in the world for a man to stay free of what will come.

I was hungry as Bo looked, and that was a lean, devouring, ribby, stalk-thin way. I didn't care who knew what about us or about Carp Rambo himself. A clock in the window of a jewelry store said quarter of three. I still had some money in my britches, and I had me a hound.

I would of dropped a dime or two in the tin cups except the beggars had gone away from there for the time

being. But they would come again toward evening, when the night crowds turned out to walk in the coolness, all feeling generous and breathing slow.

## CHAPTER VII

WE WENT IN a little restaurant farther down on Royal and sat down. The waitress come up and says, "My, that's a fine dog." Bo just looks at her; he edged up close to me, not pressed against me, but closer to me than he wanted to be to anybody else in the restaurant.

John, he looked sagged and tired but he says, "Hamburgers, two of them, and hurry up."

The waitress was a big woman with a dirty white uniform on and dyed yellow hair and a gold tooth and dark blue haughty eyes. She nods brisk. "Anything else?"

Bo leaned out toward her and she drops a hand as if she's going to pet him, but he draws back again.

"Shy, ain't he?"

"I just got him," I says. "Looks to me like he's going to be a one-man dog."

"My brother hunts with hounds. We live out near Fairhope."

"That's pretty fair country, around there," I says. "I reckon he'll make a good coon dog. Man I got him from said something about Grand Junction Field Trials. But I think he was the kind of man talks to hear himself talk, a little. It don't seem to me you'd enter no coon dog in field trials."

"I don't know," she says, looking down at Bo and kind of smiling. There's something about a proud dog makes some people look like that. "I think I've heard they use coon dogs there. You ever been?"

"No, ma'am, I haven't. Sure like to get over, some year."

"You going to bring my hamburgers?" John says.

"Hold your water," I says. "I want a bottle of Coca-Cola and a piece of pie, please."



John says something under his breath, it didn't matter what.

I says: "Shut your mouth, will you? If you don't like eating with me you can go off some place else and eat. Or does drinking just naturally make you mean?"

He says: "I ain't being mean. I'm setting here dying of no food."

"Well, don't take it out on the help," I says.

The waitress says, "That all, sir?"

"That's all," I says, and she goes away.

John is studying me kind of slow and sappy-looking with his fingers laid along his cheeks and his head sunk in his hands and his elbows balanced there on the table. He looks kind of like a cross between a big brown bear and a mean monkey, leaning toward the monkey side except you can usually tell what an animal's thinking.

I says, "Here's a couple of sandwiches," hauling them out of my back pocket. "Suzy Ellen done slapped them together this morning, and they'll go good with the rest we're getting. Have one." They was nice thick sandwiches, a mite squashed from being in my hip pocket for so long. But there was plenty of bread in them and a good bit of sidemeat.

John kind of smiles, slow, reaching out and taking one of the sandwiches and pulling the wax paper off. "Just like when you was a little shaver, ay," he says. "Just like you was in fourth grade again and with Miz Wilkus."

"Lord, you mind Miz Wilkus!" I says. I hadn't thought of her for years. It was nice, John Virgin remembering her just then. I reckon she died not so long after I left school for good, and I hope I didn't do anything to hasten her end. But she was already pretty old when we were in the school out nigh Whistler.

"Hey," I says, "you mind we used to mix up the lunches in that little weeny room they had for us to eat in, the cloakroom they called it, and how everything always tasted of the wet when it'd be raining because all the wet coats hung there and stunk up the place—"

John kind of laughs. "Oh, hell, Carp. I just figured you out. You know that?" He leaned forward. "I just put my finger out and stuck it tab on you and the trouble with you."

"That so?" I says. "Well, I note you take kindly to the sandwich whatever it is you've gone and figured out."

He chews slow, looking slow, too, like he's got a nation of satisfaction in him, leaning there, grinning now, a grin that says he'd got everything figured once and for all, and the Lord can finally take a rest. "It's a good enough sandwich, Carp. But, like I said, I got you doped out, boy. I know the reason you ain't never going to make any money, the reason you're going to die broke as an oyster-fisher, only without even the boats and nets they leave their women. Without even the money for an oyster-tonger's funeral. Yes, sir," he says, and chews some more, "I got it narrowed down. There ain't ever anybody going to do anything with you. Not no matter how many rich bitches you love and not no matter how many times you tell yourself you're going to do better—you won't. Because listen here."

I was listening, all right. I wasn't going to be hearing him for very long. I could feel the blood starting to burn and sound in my ears. Bo kept watching me with his eyes quiet and sad-like but alert.

"Listen here, you Carp Rambo. You're still a little kid, still a jerk, still a dope; you still think the world's made of a lot of good somebody read you out of a book when you was back there in Miz Wilkus' time; and you're the biggest sucker there is in the whole city and the city limits. You're a slobby little kid inside and you think everybody's going to do you good if you do them good. And that's what's wrong with you. You ain't never growed up."

I didn't say one word for a minute. What he said had some truth in it. The kind of truth that sticks you like the point of a knife. And it was a kind of knifing the way he'd said it, with his face full of a pleased smile and a kind of meanness too. Yes, it was some way true. He had something I didn't have. Out in the bay the gulls that look so fine on the wing don't look so fine when they perch on the garbage from the ships to eat their bellies full. That's the easy way they get their food. But you take a kingfisher, now, and he'll scorn anything but good fresh fare. He'll find that or starve to death, like his daddy did before him. He works harder than the gull, but I think he has a better life. That was the way I looked at it; and

them things churned around in me, but I didn't say them to John. I leaned down and I fixed the chain on Bo around the table leg and I says to him, soft: "You stay here. Mind now. Stay put, right here." I says it so soft I don't think John could even hear me.

Then I straightened up. "John," I says, "I don't mind you calling me them names you did. I thank you for getting me that job today. I reckon I'll do my best at keeping it if Mr. Durbin will let me sing enough my own way, and I reckon he will. But I didn't ask you to get it for me. And I didn't ask you to tag along with me out to Spring Hill and get swill-drunk, or pretend to get that way, on more liquor on top of the liquor you'd already stole. I'm a lot of things and mebbe worse'n what you said. But I ain't a thief and I ain't a snoop. You're both them things, and I'll give you till I count five, in my head, to stand up and step outside with me. Else I'll come over this table at you."

John went on looking just the same way except he was leaning back now. I didn't know exactly how much, altogether, he'd drunk and how much he'd poured of Hat-tram's liquor into his own bottle. But he leaned forward again, getting the balls of his feet under him.

He hadn't but started to move when I begun to count in my head, One.

He looks at me. He starts to say something, then swallows it, then starts again, maybe to say he's sorry; then changes his mind again. His hands are pulled back now too.

I counts, Two.

John Virgin says: "A total loss. I'm writing you off my book right now. I thought mebbe it was luck finding you this morning and we could both make us a little money, and I got plans—but forget it."

I was forgetting it. John was always smart in school. He always had the answers, and even when he didn't he could make up something sounded just as good. I knew any plans of his were going to cost somebody else considerable. Me, for instance. I knew that much and it didn't take any smartness to peg it.

Three, I says inside.

He stands up then. I get up right after him. He walks out through the door and into the street. I'm right at his

shoulder. We come to a side street going riverward and I gives him a nudge and he turns down that way. We walk steady and pretty fast along the street till we get nearly to the end, next to a parking lot that has a mess of cars in it but nobody around. I says, "Whoa up."

He stopped right beside me. He says, looking straight at me, swinging his jaw around to me, his eyes flat and bright as big spots of black rain on the brown of his face, "You so damn' proud and you're nothing but a calf-witted piece of poor white trash squalling hill-billy yourself. Got your pecker out for anything in skirts but always got to act high and mighty like you was better than other folks. Suppose I was to go to your old woman and tell her the way you paid for that hound, hauling more'n the cash out of your jeans—"

"Whoa up," I says. I nudged and pushed and butted him fast, like you butt a horse when he ain't behaving, heading him back in between two of the cars that sat there shiny in the sun. One was a new Chevrolet and the other was a green Packard. He put his hands up, but I had mine out quicker and I slapped his hands down and shouldered him on back. I didn't want it to be a real scrambling fight; he was fast, and I was worried about that, because I'd forgot and hadn't took the guitar off. It thumped on my back and made a noise of strings together the way a wind harp sounds. So I kept on butting and nudging and shoving and shouldering right smart, and then when he was well in between the cars I brought up my right fast as I could. I had a little luck; he was off balance. He stumbled into my fist when it came up. It made a noise like a hollow log and he swirled around, falling and scraping down alongside the Chevvie, and when he hit the gravel I could hear the bottle in his britches go smash. There was blood on his mouth and he started to get up, but not far, just kneeling. I took a couple steps backward and then turned around and walked away from him. The last I seen of him, he was kneeling there holding his mouth where I'd split it. I maybe hadn't meant to throw it so hard, but the car had broke his fall some.

Well, like I said, I hadn't asked to meet him that morn-ing. It was too bad he wasn't a whole man instead of just being on the fringe of being a whole man. He was always



going to be hovering there on that fringe. And if I made an enemy of him, well, that ain't anything to be regretful for. My own daddy had more enemies than you'd find in a wood full of robbers. And he had friends so thick they were likes bees swarming too; he could call them up from his past in clusters.

I walked back in the restaurant and sat down. The waitress come up and smiled with her gold tooth showing. "I was afraid you walked out, then I seen you left your dog." I fondled Bo's ears. I suppose I done it because he called me a male whore, much as anything, I thought. Bo laid his nose in my hand.

I says: "I'll eat the hamburgers. My friend had to leave."

"All right. I forgot to ask what kind of pie."

"Apple," I says.

I give the part of the sandwich John had left to Bo, and split mine with Bo, too. It felt good sitting there in the swash of sun sloping through the windows, eating and thinking with Bo right by. It was better not to have anybody else blabbering and projecting around.

## CHAPTER VIII

THERE WASN'T ANYTHING about that first night's work to remember or put away to chew over, except it wasn't as bad as I'd thought it might be. Old man Durbin come up to me along about eleven and he says: "They like you; I thought they would. Proves people still like the old songs best. Lay 'em in a lousy song now and again though, don't forget."

I looked at his green eyes in the smoke. The Magnolia was pretty frowsty by this time. Every table was filled and they'd even dragged in some tables from the back

that wasn't in too good shape and had to have splints of newspapers stuck under their legs. You couldn't hear yourself think for the talk. Every time I'd sung they'd been nice and polite and quieted down some and afterwards clapped heavy and even hooted and hollered and brayed and called a little, the way they do for regular hill-williams. The boy Loosh was helping serve the drinks, and the old man had been a-pouring them just as sharp as he could move. When he talked to me was about the first spell of rest he'd had. That old-fangled cash register over behind the counter where he sold cigars and cigarettes and punchboard chances, with a lot of curlicues done on it in metal, must have been just stuffed with green. I wasn't doing too bad myself. I'd cleared at least another ten dollars in silver, and one guy—he was pretty skunked, I guess—had asked me to play "Stardust" and he give me a dollar bill, one of them old big kind that you hardly ever see any more.

It was a pretty good-tempered crowd with a lot of women in it. Most of them was kind of hard-bit and chewed on at the edges. They'd been growed up to be farm women, and then the first war had come and the town had boomed—I mean the second war really, but the first war this town ever boomed—and then the second war come that nobody in charge called war, Korea, and these women's men just naturally settled down to stay. They had it pretty good, too. They was lonesome and restless as a bunch of cats in an alley, but they was enjoying life big and totting up a fine score of drinks and running up credit in jewelry stores where they advertise a dollar down and twenty-four whole months to sock in the balance. I felt way down deep in me that they was stunned, the way kids is stunned when they get too much candy or too much of anything all at once, and that way down deep they knew, too, they was missing something they'd ought to've had, that they was being gypped. But it was nothing you could put a tongue to just offhand. And they was eager to know you and eager to hear you sing.

Old man Durbin, standing there, his thumbs hooked in his vest and sweat standing out on his bald forehead, he swiveled his eyes around the place and out to the front where the slobby green paint climbed above the heads of

the people at the tables, and he says, "Carp, I never thought I'd be stuck in a place like this, this time of life."

"Why, you ain't so old," I says. We was leaning against the wall at the back. The boy Loosh come past us with a tray of sandwiches. He says, "Scuse me, suh, scuse," and waggled his way around our knees. A crowd of people who'd whanged up two tables together in the middle of the room was singing a dirty song but nobody minded. It was a common-acting, common-knowing crowd, but it wasn't the kind that just snickers at dirtiness; they liked a slice of it for what it was and called it by its known names.

"No, I ain't as old as I feel, most days," Durbin says, grinning sour. "You know what? My daddy was a preacher back in Huntsville when I was your age, and I was damned near ordained myself."

"Well," I says, "that don't strike me so peculiar. There's a power of preachers walking around without their collars on wrongside fore."

He smoothed his belly with his fingers, his thumbs still hooked in his vest. "You're a damn' funny youngster, you know that, Carp?" I looked at him. "I mean—Ah, let it go. Better go play 'em another one now."

"Will do," I says. I don't know what he was going to say, but whatever it was it wasn't going to be uneasy. Him and me, we knew each other. Moving away, he says, "What happened to that leech-burr, that sidekick of yours?"

"My sidekick done stopped kickin'," I says. "I don't reckon he'll be around a spell."

He give me kind of a cornerwise look with his green eyes shining. "You do well to get shut of him. He'll be up for theft or murder or both some day. I've lived long enough to see the kind, good many times. Being nice to him's like feeding a swamp rattler."

I didn't say nothing. I took off toward the middle of the room and started to play "The Bonnie Blue Flag." It's got different sets of words to it, and some are old words that got themselves made up in the War of the Rebellion, words you don't see on the regular sheet music in the music shop over on St. Joseph. They're kind of fierce words, and I figure the people who thought them up needed the fierceness bad at the time. Some way, some-

times, I figure they still need it. I don't mean the Confederate flags on radiator caps, neither. That's something a body can buy. No, you have to be born here, I guess, to feel it and know about this fierceness. You got to maybe be born here and live poor and think proud.

Not everybody does it.

Well, I didn't regret John Virgin much. I reckoned he'd turn up before long. Every once in a while I'd think of how the day behind me had just blossomed out and bloomed the way nobody had expected it to, and that made a flare light up in me; so maybe I was singing my best and some over. I'd think of Bo tied up to the desk back in old man Durbin's office. He had a plate of meat and a bowl of fresh water, and the boy Loosh was keeping an eye on him whenever he could. And I'd think of Ellen. Every once in a while, I couldn't help it, I'd look over the heads of the people and through the smoke toward the door standing open to the warm night. A good many early-flying bugs had come in and was slapping around at the lights and making big feathering shadows on the walls. A good many new people kept coming in too, and they found themselves places to sit somehow. I reckon they were looking for something special and just had to come in and see could they find it here, with the money in their pockets. But what I was looking for didn't have any price you could buy it with.

It's funny how when you're looking and waiting that way, you see just about everybody in the world except who you want and hope to see. And you can't stop the beating in your chest, just between the cage of the ribs, in the uppermost part of the belly. I suppose that's where a man's soul must live, even though you couldn't prove it by any kind of X-ray. It sure skittered and flapped and beat in there for me. But she didn't show up. Even so, it wasn't till one in the morning that the fluttery thing in me give her up for this night. The real me, I'd give her up for this night, long before.

It was a good night for walking along steady and smooth, the way you do when you're going some place definite and you don't take your time looking around. I let Bo out a little on the chain and we plugged down Dauphin. Pretty soon we got to Broad and we walked



along under the streetlamps that was a pale mist, each one like a clouded-over moon all on its own. There was still quite a few cars on the streets, almost silent at the stoplights and then with their engines humming when they'd start up. But when I cut down to St. Joseph and through a lot I know and over to St. Stephens, there wasn't hardly any cars out. Mostly trucks, that time of night, past twelve, big double-deckers with their loads going cross-country and down to the Gulf from Louisiana. They'd gleam silver under the moon, and there was a passel of stars, too, that washed down over their corrugated silver sides.

Bo, he kept just a little ahead of me, like part of the deep shadow under the trees. The trees smelled good, standing quiet in the deep night. Along St. Stephens there, there are lots of them, old magnolias with their leaves slick and green and thick and like something you could eat for their warmth, but they don't taste good; I tried them once. There are the mock oranges too, and the live oaks, and the whole slew of wisteria vines that coil around each other and grow like heavy gray-tan snakes, twisting and twining. I liked it under there.

Once in a while you could see a point of light down low that was a reflection of a street light or maybe the moon and the stars on Bo's hide. He didn't get too far ahead, not even enough to tauten the chain. I whistled to myself between my teeth. Now and again out of the shadows Bo would make a little "Rruff" noise, and then a couple of people would be coming: nigger couples from the Avenue where they mostly hang out on Friday and Saturday nights, with their arms hooked together, walking along, loving each other. They are more slow-loving, slow-walking, really-meaning-it people than most. They'd look at Bo as he went ghosting past, and I could about taste the way the men felt about him, most of them, anyway; they'd give him another look, and another, with their eyeballs glinting blue-white in the flickered light.

Way up ahead you could see the stars skittering between the leaves. Then you'd come out on a side street and see them full, and when you were across and ducked under the trees again, they'd still be dancing in your mind, cooler and steadier, for all their flicker, than any light you'd ever really see, like the downlow lights of the

neons from the little groceries along there, that were left on all night.

And I see a girl standing on a back gallery down a side street a ways, looking down into the yard below. She was wearing a nightdress you could see her legs through, young legs, thin and toothpicky, but growing. She lifted her head when we went by and watched us till we was across and into the shadow again.

Bo's nails went ticking on the walks and then hushed when he sidewayed out onto the grass.

It was like it must of been in the old times, certain places along there, with the light slanting in from the side, showing a balcony made of iron, the ironwork careful and scrolled, a pattern of leaves or ears of corn. I thought of them that had taken such pains over it, wanting it just so. And I thought of them now, dead in the ground, part of the earth that smelled of high spring, strong, late at night like this, with the night mist cooling and filling the air with earth smells and remembrances.

It's a pretty good hike out to Whistler. When I got past the Gulf station on the corner where the roads come together I took the dirt road to the right, leaving the last of the cars and the trucks to go their own different ways through the dark. Here the road felt better underfoot. It always did, coming home. Bo liked it too. He'd run from one side to the other, sniffing at one bank and nosing into some sweet grass there, then cutting back and aiming himself the other way, but keeping a straight pattern of running for all his zigzag getting-acquainted lope. I liked to watch him move. It was like watching a young boy run when he's still awkward and like a colt but with the grape in his muscles filling out and learning. Or a young girl walking, when she don't think anybody's around, with a kind of skip from time to time. It was a young and living way to move.

That little old road was made a long while ago, and the people who made it didn't have much to their backs. I reckon they was kind of scampy people, not good for much. They was people who liked to set and sing or get together and have a dance; you couldn't say they was much for progress. There's a fishing settlement down on the Chickasabogue where my daddy's people come from

that minds me of this road, only it's bigger and more firm. The whole place looks like just a blob of riot, a kind of garbage of old boats all hunkered up together nigh the river bridge, all color of boats and all kinds of shacks leaning to the water. Well, the road where Suzy Ellen's dad built our house, taking all those years to build and not really slaying himself over it, it's like that—not so big or so slapdash as that fishing settlement, but still off at the end of nowhere and with the feeling of old ways, old times, about it.

I come to where the bricks were sunk in the earth and grewed over a little by grass. I hitched Bo up close and says: "Now, you be on your party manners. Don't piddle on her furniture or she'll lay a mop to you." I says it low, and he justs looks ahead, impatient; maybe he knew I ought to know better than to call him for such puppy tricks.

I went quiet up the walk and under the camellia bushes. They smelled pure and heavy in the moonlight. There's a smell they have at the roots of the bushes, even when not blooming, that's like the beginning of the world, all the secrets locked in a parcel there. I went up the steps with Bo, quiet and firm. There was a light in the window, shining down on a copy of last Sunday's *Press-Register* that was open to the comics. It fell over the worn gray-blue-brown divan that's shiny-slick and hollowed out in the middle from being sat on, and over the window sill and down to the stretch of carpet that isn't much but that Suzy Ellen kept looking good by beating the hell out of it every week around in back, with the lint just flying up and away to settle on the leaves of the oaks where the woods start.

I set my fingers to the knob and I sucked in a deep breath. Behind me and out past the camellia bushes was the stars. I looked at them a minute, still standing there. Bo stood close to my leg and he smelled at the screen, but not loud. I reckon I'd done naught to be ashamed for. A woman, most women, wouldn't see it that way, but I could tell it was so from the way I felt down inside my belly where there isn't any place to name, just a thing that's there. I pulled back slow on the knob of the screen door and lifted up on it so's it wouldn't come with a

screech. There's no reason to lock your doors down our road; there's nothing to steal.

I stepped in and Bo stepped with me and the chain made a clink where it joined his collar, and Suzy Ellen, from the next room, calls, "Who's that?" There was a little silence like she was wondering to be scared, and I could near hear her heart beat. "That you, Carp?"

I just let the silence be and took up the slack in the chain and guided Bo through the front room and on into the next. I could see in the kitchen where there was a covered plate and a glass of milk setting beside it on the table, and I was gladder than ever I had Bo to bring her.

"Carp, damn it, if that's you and you're aiming to scare me—"

I sneaked on around the side wall to just outside her room. Well, it's my room too but seems more like hers because she fixed it up that way, out of magazines and such. I stopped with the edge of my shadow, and Bo's, just aside the jamb of the door. Then I let go the chain and give Bo a little shove. He wouldn't move. The bed was rustling inside the room. I could hear the clock ticking on the dresser. I set my hands harder on Bo's flanks and give a heave. He went into the room, and Suzy Ellen give a holler you could hear from now to breakfast and points north, really stretching itself, and I stepped in just when it was stretching for true, and the yell cut off and she come for me with her fists. She was just like a big white bird come swirling and scratching out of the sky, leaping like that from the end of the bed. I knocked her hands down and gathered her in fast. She's only just a mite smaller than I am, but she's a deal lighter and thinner. The only places she swells are the right places for her to swell. The nightdress she was wearing was scrounged up in a wad under my hands. I tipped her back, keeping her hands away from my hair, and I says: "That any way to welcome a friend? That spreading out the big old welcome mat for a hound I went through hell and high water and tarnation to drag home to you?" I let her go, and the nightdress fell back down around her. I liked it the way it was before so I scrooched it up again. "What you wear these things for? You cold or something?"

She stands there looking at me, not fighting, but



breathing quick. She's a silver blonde, and her hair can get wild as a witch, yet it lays down smooth and silky enough when she wants it to. She's got a narrow, high-cheekboned face and a straight nose proud as a hawk's. Here eyes was flashing her scornfulest riled-up look at me now, and she's breathing so fast and deep there might as well be no nightdress there at all. Bo, he sat down on the floor in front of the dresser and took it all in. His tongue was red in a corner of his mouth, and his mouth not all the way open but like he was smiling, not a laugh, but just a hydy-smile.

"Well," I says, "you going to answer my question or you just going to stand there tongueless and bereaved, Miz Rambo?" I went forward to her in a long step that felt like it does when you swing a skiff around to dock and come homing alongside thump, right and true, and I tightened her to me and I said down into her mouth: "Here's your damned hound, old woman. And all you can do is scritch like an owl."

I lifted her up and set her beside me on the bed. Her breath was hot and she felt hot under my hands. I worried that damn' nightdress right off over her head, and do you know, for maybe a minute, full, she never did say a single word?

SUMMER



## CHAPTER IX

LIFE WENT ALONG just like a melon growing, setting in a patch and taking the heat of the sun above and the warm of the ground beneath. I like to mind that time and summon it up to mull over, because it was what life should always be and what I'd always knowed it could be. I'd get up early, along about nine, and that was early if you mind what times I got home from the Magnolia Bar. I'd take Bo out in the woods and let him rove on his own, after the first few days or so; it was a pleasure setting there on a log and hearing him work around the trees.

Sometimes Suzy Ellen, she come with me. Not many women know how to be with a dog, any dog, let alone a hound, but she knew. She had a feeling and a gift for it. I would set there, and her beside me and the shadow patterns of the leaves soft on the ground; it was getting hotter every day now and the weathermen, they was shaking their heads and predicting terrible heat waves in the newspaper. They do that every summer. The heat waves always come, too. You wouldn't think it would be such big news after a spell. But they ain't waves either, they're just times that come and settle down like a tent and stay. The sun would climb right for the sky's center, and you felt it would stay there for a year of time, and I'd set there without a shirt, sweating and happy and listening to Bo snuff. It was a sound like a little train, and you could tell where he was and what he was up to by it. Suzy Ellen would set there alongside, combing her hair with an old horn comb that was one of the things her mother had and her daddy left for her in our house. The comb going silky through her hair was a polite hiss.

When I'd figure we'd been there long enough I'd slaunch up and whistle, short and loud, and then pretty quick here'd come Bo, just a-scudding along and not letting any of the brush or thickets stand in his way but brushing them aside like he was as big as a horse and as full of hell as a black cloud. I'd thump him on the ribs



and say hydy and he'd wriggle and stomp his feet around happy, and Suzy Ellen would say: "I'll have you to know he's *my* dog. Don't make so merry much over him."

"Hell, he knows he's your dog, but us gentlemen got to stick together," I'd say. I'd rub him down good and curry him with a little brush I carried. He was putting on weight and he wasn't shy, he wouldn't crawfish off the way he'd done at first. When a neighbor or even a stranger come in the yard he'd just stand there looking at me and waiting for a sign, and if I says it was all right, it was all right.

After breakfast, most times, I'd mosey out around to the side and look in a birdhouse been there for as long as I know about. It was set high up between the boughs, where they forked, of a mock orange. There wasn't any birds lived in it; it was where I kept the saving of money I was doing from my steady job. I counted it up one morning and I had close to seventy-five dollars. I'd been getting it changed to bills as soon as I could, and that was a sight of money. I'd been clearing high as forty to fifty a week, all told, in the Magnolia. I couldn't say honest that I liked the work because it was too much like a job after the first spell, after the first getting to know it. But me and Pete Durbin got along like the fingers of the same hand; I reckon we was made of the same clay, lots of ways. Long as he was bossing me, I figured I could stand it. And like I said a mite back, the crowd was amiable and not bad, just hell- and pleasure-bent, and not getting all the pleasure they was looking for, and I liked them and was sorry for them.

Suzy Ellen wasn't jawing me so much these days neither, except sometimes I could see a thing in her eyes—maybe when she'd lean across the table with a dish of grits and stop and look at me before setting it down—a cloudy kind of something like a doubt. For one thing, I knowed she wondered just how long me and this job was going to last. She knowed good and deep well I wasn't a man to let a thing cling to me if I disliked it steady. It was like she was holding her breath. I reckoned I could fool her, though. I reckoned the job would last a good while, long as I kept on feeling the way I did. And that feeling wouldn't stop unless something come along to unbalance it, the way a high wind can topple a rock over

the edge of a bluff. Wasn't no high winds I could perceive on the way, though.

Well, and maybe there was a something else behind that cloudy look in her eye. Could have been because Suzy Ellen, for all her clattery jackdaw ways, was quick as a trap and deep as a river, times. But, like I say, there wasn't any high winds; nothing had been blowed in through the doors of the Magnolia Bar. I'd even stopped looking, and it wasn't a painful thing to me. I felt smoothed out and content, like there wasn't a single thing coming due me.

No, sir, them days just went on peaceful and fine without change, but with enough interest in them to hold you tight to looking ahead to what would come next. And the sun so hot and the sky wiped clean of clouds most days. Sometimes there'd be some in the morning; I could see them from our bed, big slow tumbling clouds that humped up white as they say snow is. Then they'd dwindle small as they swept out, majestic-slow to the Gulf, leaving the blue all polished and so bright your eyes couldn't hardly bear it. I'd lay there some few minutes before getting up, thinking quiet of Ellen, remembering how our ways had crossed and wondering if they ever would again. One thing I couldn't keep out of my head was what she'd said about her being bad. It was a thing I couldn't believe, never mind how certain and sad she'd said it. I can't say I thought of John Virgin much at all. I thought of that one day, though, and of what power of ripening there can be in one day.

Then I'd hear Suzy Ellen sashaying around in the kitchen and I'd get up and come sailing out to her and the sun would be falling in through the side vines, lighting up the milk bottles and the red lettering on the soup cans on the shelves, and Suzy Ellen, she'd be grinning at me and maybe jawing, just a little, just to keep her tongue in practice.

One morning I gripped Suzy Ellen by the arm and I says: "Get that sorry dress off and snake yourself into something makes a man look twice or three times, and come on downtown with me. Now don't stand there bating your eyes like you couldn't hear English. Hell, John, it's a poor rag of a woman wants to do naught but fuss around the sink, day like this one."

"What you got up your sleeve, Carp Rambo? You got a nasty wild look in your eye. I got a gumbo to make, and this house is just as pigged up as a hoorah's nest. You might just beat the carpet, you so full of ambition. Leggo my arm now."

I says: "When you hear a man order, you better go spit to the wind and see if it ain't a hurricane on the way. Now hustle into some proper clothes or else I take you across my knee and hell only knows when you set down again. This ain't a day for carpet beating. That damn' carpet looks plumb wore out from being beat on anyhow. Come on, now, we're on our way."

She jawed me some but she got into her best blue dress. It fit fine, a kind of light blue like the air itself. And she put dabs of perfume behind her ears and between her breasts and lipsticked up, and I will say, she looked proud as them that have pride before the fall. She comes swinging out and we says goodbye to Bo, and she stands there behind the screen with his black nose pressed against it, watching us, his head looking like a devil-dog's, the way a good cooner's does, lean and sharp and black, and only the eyes alive.

We skun down the walk and along the road, going fast, and the sun above burning hard and making the dark green of the bush grass at the roadside look almost blue with the shadows under it, and the woods off behind the houses on the road standing still and all the leaves hanging limp.

The man down at the Gulf station on the corner, where other roads come in, his name was Gus Helflick, and he set under the shadow of the roof that goes out a little way over the station with his chair tipped against the wall, and his forehead's the color of shrimp, and big drops oozed out under his uniform hatbrim. "Have a dope," he says. "This day's a real killer. Damn it, you two going to a party?"

"I don't know where-all he's dragging me," Suzy Ellen says disgusted. "Could be the shores of the Promised Land, the way he acts. I think the heat done got to him, wanting to traipse downtown, day like this one."

"Here," Gus says, giving her a coke. "Sorry I got nothin' to go with it. You goin' on the town with the old woman, ay, Carp?"

"Naw," I says. "I got a little something I want to look at and inspect before we take it home." Suzy Ellen pops the bottle lip out of her mouth.

"Oh, Lord! I bet you my soul he's set to buy another hound . . . and the one we got's eating provisions faster'n a field hand."

I says, "Whose hound is he and how much grief did I hear rammering both ears, morning and night, till he got there, and who takes care of him, and then again, who'd beller like a baby with a sugar tit snatched away if he come up missing some rainy eve?"

Gus, he laughs, and then he serioused up some. "Carp, we miss you and that *gittar* of yours out to the M. E. Church. Had a seafood supper out there the other night, and nothin' but a phonograph and a scratchy pile of old records to furnish us entertainment. When you goin' to get back in the fold and supply music for the Lord's appointed?"

"When they set about making eight days in the week, I guess," I says. "I got my nose so close to the grindstone it's getting wore down to a nubbin. All to feed and clothe and care for a woman don't even know enough to keep her mouth shut and just travel along when a man's bent on getting her something to make her life more easy and gay. Jaw, jaw, jaw. If I was to come home toting a million dollars in a wheelbarrow she'd jaw me if the barrow didn't have rubber tires."

"I'm coming down to the Magnolia some night myself," Gus says. "I hear you're doing right well down there."

"You do that, and I'll buy you a drink, providing I can ease the money off my helpmeet," I says. She takes a swipe at me and I held her off and we scrambled around in the sun for a minute, laughing. Then the bus showed up. It was the bus to Prichard, not downtown to the big town, but I says, "Come along, you," and hustled her across to it and we climbed aboard.

She held her nose in the air and she sniffs, "Prichard's a likely enough town, but I thought if you was going to buy me a washing machine it would be at one of the big stores."

I says: "Washing machine? Hell, what would we do with a washing machine? I don't aim to cosset you until the starch is all gone from your legs and arms and back-



bone and all you can do is lay around and mealtimes serve me up canned tuna. We're set to get something will improve both our lot, and give us a little joy. Now get that washing machine out of your head."

She sniffed again and looks away, and by and by we come down the hill into Prichard. On a Saturday like this, Prichard is a busy town. Not a fancy town; in fact it looks like something you'd want to get shut of in a hurry, I guess, if you was driving through from the North. There ain't many trees, for one thing. And there ain't many buildings over two stories. Prichard is another war town that just busted its buttons and grew, with folks coming in from Tennessee and West Virginia and Louisiana and I don't know where all, and while there's more buildings than you'd want to throw up in a hurry there are still more people than there's room for. A good many of the Prichard people come in the Magnolia. Good people, down at the base. They mostly admire hill-william, but they listened to what I mainly sing with a kind of liking too, so that was all right.

We lighted on a corner near the drugstore and I says, "Now, you go in there and get yourself a couple of dopes or a soda or such like, and I'll be by in a little while with what I got in mind."

She says: "I don't aim to be stood up while you go tarrying off with some men. I'll wait half an hour, and if you ain't back by then I'm going to kite off on my own. I need some towels and some curtain cloth and some magazines and I got a mind to get me a permanent-wave kit. Don't you expect to find me here if you're late."

I says, "It'll be a sorry thing if you ain't here to see what I aim to bring." She flirts her nose up and swings around and goes into the drugstore. Damn it, you got to admire that woman: the way she walks, kind of eel-slim and yet proud and with that high-nosed look and all that fire in her, a reaching and lifting fire. I don't know, I thought: women are so different. There ought to be different names you can call them and know them by. It don't seem right just to label the whole body of them Women, and let it go at that. They are as different as night from day and water from desert. There ought to be more names for them than Noah had for the animals in the ark. Even then, there wouldn't be enough to call

them for what they are and hit it true, for each and every one, for once and for all.

I went in the used-car lot run by this fellow calls himself Crazy Tod, the Wildest Trader in the South. There was a bunch of people looking at cars, mousing around the way they do, opening doors and squinching in and studying the speedometers to see what the mileage was, as if that ever did any good. And feeling fenders to see where they'd been crumpled and then torched over, and listening to the valves click in the Chevies, and frowning and looking grim and serious. They was pretty well bound to get taken anyway, I figured; but people like to act like they ain't being taken, even when they know they are. Crazy Tod, he knowed it too. Him and his moonface the color of old leather, he was greeting and meeting the people and giving lollipops to the kids and standing around like the friendly man of creation who'd just set up to give a free circus to humankind. One of the other salesmen, a little runty fellow with pimples and a new gray felt hat perched on the back of his head and wearing a tie spite of the heat, he come up to me. "Looking for anything special, bub?"

"Yep," I says. "I'm looking for the best buy I can get for seventy-five down and about ten a week for as long as my health and your patience holds out."

"Well," he says, "that ain't much down. You figure you could go a little higher?"

"That's the absolute top-rock limit," I says. "How about this heap over here?" I pointed to a car that had seen better days, a Chevie it was, with the nose kind of bashed in and the stuffing coming in balls out of the seat side. But I liked the color, a dark red, and the paint wasn't bad. We stepped over to it. He fingers a tag attached to the steering post.

"This is marked at three hundred even, friend."

"Start her up," I says. He gets in and tromps on her, and after a fit of coughing she starts. I went around and flipped the hood up and listened and looked. The block was solid grease, you couldn't see nothing but that, and the plugs was all sunk down in grease and hard-packed oil; the distributor and all the ignition wires was greased up black and solid too. But she didn't sound so terrible, just kind of a racketing flutter in her that I figured was

valves, and I could shine up the block and the rest. He cut her down to a mutter, and I went around and stood behind the exhaust and leaned my ear down there close and listened. She went "Wurrough," and "Wurrough" again, but steady; didn't sound like she was missing too bad.

"Finest transportation on earth, a Chevvie," the salesman says.

"Yes," I says. He'd come around and was standing in back of me. I was still crouched down there, listening. "I bet she was even finer before them damn' Yankees come raiding and stealing and riding their cavalry over her, too." I lifted my head, waiting for him to give me an argument, like any salesman worth a pile of peas would do, and there past some other people and some cars, way across the lot in the corner, I see some legs I know. I was certain sure they was Ellen's. I stood up slow.

The salesman says, "She's had the best of care and protection. See, there was this little old schoolma'am owned her and kept her up on blocks most of the year, and—"

"Well, don't you sell her for less till I get back," I says.

I went across the lot to the corner. She was standing alongside a Cadillac, I reckon the one I'd seen in Clint's garage that day. It glistened dark in the sun. She looked fine and bold against it, wearing a thin jersey with stripes on it and a white skirt and her head kind of atilt, looking away from me, toward the office where Clint Hattram was talking to Crazy Tod. I was still a touch dizzy from bending over the exhaust maybe, or maybe it was something else. The sun was hot and hazy over her hair and around her throat, her throat creamy-brown and full, and her eyes like they was looking a long way off beyond the lot and through the blue of the sky straight to the sun. I could just hear Clint saying: "You can have her for that. I'd rather sell her this way than trade her in. I told them I'd sell her this way if they didn't give me a better trade." For a crazy second I had the notion he was talking about Ellen. But of course it was the Cadillac.

I come up beside her and she turns her head a little, startled, and I says, "Hello, Ellen."

She looks at me like she was having trouble coming back from where she'd been, and then she reaches out her

hand to touch my arm, her fingers cool there. "Carp," she says. "I thought I'd never see you again. I—"

We stood there a second, just looking.

I says, shrugging, kind of: "It don't matter. I just see you over here, thought I'd step around and say hello. Seems like kind of a funny place to meet, don't it?"

She looks at me and shakes her head a little. That sadness; it was like I could almost touch it. But I didn't reckon I ought to touch it, or touch her either. Some place out on the sidewalk somebody turned on a loudspeaker, and it blasted out dance music, a Mexican song some people up North wrote.

She says, "I didn't come because—wanted to too much, I guess—didn't think it was right—not fair to you, Carp."

I could just barely hear her through the blary music.

I says: "Well, it was up to you. I looked for you to come but I figured you knew best. Only, I don't see how you can decide what's right or fair for me. That's for me to say."

I took as if to step away, then, but she says, "Wait," and her voice is raised against the music. "You're not angry, are you? Carp, don't go away, I want to talk to you."

I turned back to her. "No," I says, "I ain't mad. I did kind of look for you for a while there, but then I give up. I figured if you wanted—if you wanted to bad enough, I guessed you'd be along. And if you didn't, well that was all right too. But I wasn't scared on my own account, and I don't guess I ever will be."

She made a kind of music that was a lot different from what the loudspeaker was blatting. She made it with just the way she looked, standing there quiet and stone-still inside herself, and like nothing that had to do with the car lot or the day or even the sunshine, but just with us, her and me.

She made music when she says, "You're still there, at the Magnolia—" I nodded, and she said fast: "I'll be in, Carp. I shouldn't. If I had any strength at all I'd just smile and send you on your way. I guess I'm not a very strong person. Or a good one. For anybody. But I'll be in." She sounded happy and excited, and that was the way I felt, too. Looking into her eyes was like drowning in warm, sun-dazzled water.

I drew a deep breath, like a first breath, starting all



over, and I says: "I'm glad, Ellen. And about you not being good, well, I guess it ain't up to you to say. No man can be judged till his life's end. Woman either. I'll see you then, Ellen."

"Yes." She smiled and nodded quick. She looked awful happy, the way she always ought to look. I don't know; it was like something that couldn't be stopped, something she hadn't really thought of stopping. Nothing stopping, everything going on, like a wave that had broke on the shore and the pause of time had just been until the next wave, but the sea itself always there.

I moved on and back through and around the cars and the people and shouldered up to the salesman I'd left. We started dickering about the Chevvie. After a while the Cadillac pulled out of the corner, and over the salesman's shoulder I see Hattram gunning her to hell and gone down the street, and Ellen sitting straight and black-haired, her hair shooting off sun sparks, and not looking back. I didn't know if Clint made a deal to sell the Cadillac or not. I reckon it was just a notion on his part, the way a big shot has notions. I didn't care to know. He's another wave, I thought, and there's so many, so many in that sea, and the sea so deep and unresting.

## CHAPTER X

THE SKY OVER the Gulf was just as clear as a clear wine, but blue, and it had been that way for two days. I reckon anybody tells you summers are all alike is lying. Every one of them has something special about it, and this one had sure been a surprise for me. I sat and rocked there in the middle of the thwart, that was laid out in a little pocket down to the main deck of the launch, where I could relax and bait hooks easy, with the dead seaweedy smell of fish scales around and up my nose, and I thought how this had been a special dreaming kind of summer,

but true as rain for all that. The reflection of the launch in the water drifted alongside, kind of green blue, and I could see my own face, far down and wrinkled by the ripples we made as we drifted. Up high the sun burned hot and secure and set for a spell of fierceness that would make all the turpentine run in the turpentine pines and beat down the corn in the fields through Alabama and Mississippi and have the leaves curling back on their stems and turn the earth dusty as flour, except where it stays that stiff red in the dark clay of the Alabama roads. Out here in the Gulf you couldn't think much about roads of any kind, though. You were set free of all human considerations, seems, except maybe wondering if there would be a good strike before nightfall. And you'd wonder, too, how anything that looked as calm and controlled and big and slick as the Gulf could put out such a mess and variety of fish.

It was the second day of the Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo. Rodeo: that's a funny name to call anything on water. We was out of sight of all land and just by ourselves. I was setting there on the thwart, unwinding some line that Hattram had got snarled, picking at it kind of lazy with my fingernails and being thirsty in the middle of my throat but knowing all I had to do was go back in and climb the two stairs to the cabin and then step down three stairs and reach back to the ice locker and pull up a nice frosted beer. It ain't so bad being thirsty when you know it's there.

Ellen was asleep on the rear deck. I couldn't see her from here. Nor I couldn't see her in the reflection of the whole side of this part of the boat that lay stretched out, mahogany-shining and clear, in the dark green-blue wavery water. I worked at the line and unsnarled the knots, coiling what was clear in a little loop that kept growing on my blue-jean-covered left knee, and the sun soaked into my back and I thought, I'll be black as a buck before the summer's out.

It was easy and natural, the way it had happened, like it was supposed to happen. Like I was here through nothing I had done myself, or through what John Virgin had started way back last spring, but like it had just come about all by itself, moving us with it, the way the swell of water moves the ripples on the surface of a bay. Tell you.

She'd come in the Magnolia, just started coming in by herself, then later sometimes with Hattram, and after the first few times or so it didn't loom up like anything special but seemed like a kind of pleasing fullness, and that was all. She had a way of making it easy and comfortable. One night when I'd brought Suzy Ellen along with me, they even joked and talked a while, and Suzy Ellen said later: "There's a real fine lady. She's what a lady'd ought to be." I agreed with her but didn't put a point to it. We'd all got along just dandy and warm, and it was just like water going over a dam when Hattram offered me this job of going along with him to help out on the rodeo. It meant a fine three days on the water and I nodded Yes right off, and Suzy Ellen, she was all for it, allowed as how it would give her a chance to get some work done around the house without me everlastingly underfoot.

Hattram was a wishing fisherman but not a very good one. He had the patience for it, but he didn't have the feel. He was all right with a couple drinks in him because he didn't do much but set and stare out over the water from behind them black goggles he wore. What you see with sun goggles on is a different world, not blue but kind of dimmed and not real any more. I didn't worry myself much about him—how he might feel or what he might think. Ellen herself handled everything smooth and friendly-like when we was all together. When we was alone it was different. It wasn't that she'd swarm all over me; fact is, we hardly even touched. But the way she looked at me was like touching, and a good deal more. She looked at me like she was saying she'd be hungry all her life, and I was the only thing that could keep her from starving, complete and sure.

Some way this changed things for me. I still wanted her as much as ever, but in a different way now, or for a different reason. It's hard to explain, but what I mean is, my wanting to take her wasn't just for the sheer and simple joy of the taking any more; it was all mixed up now with that need and hunger I could see in her eyes. You'd think it would be better the way it was before, just direct and one way, but no, I was downright glad it had changed. It made me feel that when it happened again it would mean more, because I was giving more. Hell, I said it was hard to explain, and I don't guess I have. I

suppose if you looked in my mind you would of seen two women there, and I was mighty fond of them both, in two different ways. I know it ain't right and churchly or even *right*, and it ain't supposed to be. I'm just trying to say how it was.

Hattram, he'd found out I come from the Chickasabogue country original, back when I was a pup, and I guess he kind of liked to hear me talk about fishing and hounds and such. You take a man like that and set him down to scraping a living with his bare hands some earlier in his life, he might of turned out to be a pretty fine sort. I don't know. I sometimes figured it wasn't Hattram's fault the old Senator had give him so much, so young, and that there ought to be special training courses, the way they give courses in first-aid and lifesaving, before a man could be trusted to have that much money and still be a man. Them kind of thoughts made me feel near charitable toward Hattram. Other hand, he could be a mean bastard when he so felt, no question. Times he'd just set and make little needly remarks like hooks aimed to snag into people's flesh—even Ellen's. They always seemed to slide off her, though. Even easier, these past two days. And I didn't know or care what Hattram's thoughts or feelings might be.

I only knew that out there on the water it didn't matter. Nothing much did, unless you wanted it to. I'd kind of hated leaving Pete Durbin, even for them three days, but he'd been mighty square about it within his own circle of sourness. He said he wouldn't dock me none of my week's pay and he even give me an extra five, that last Saturday. I was looking forward to going back. It was nice to know there was a place where, without nothing ever being spoke between us about it, somebody understood why I had to sing the old ones—why it was a power laid on me from the time I learned to sing, and from my daddy, and way back back of his daddy in turn. But out here seemed more'n a million miles from the State Docks and from Government Street and from Dauphin and the Magnolia; it was just like we'd been drifting for ever and ever, without a stop. With that old blue water and that high blue sky, and the sun on my back friendly and warm as the flat of a huge hand laid deep along the spine.



It felt good to be setting there working on the line, lazy-like, thinking these things and figuring back to where they'd started and wondering if they'd got planned out even before you was born. And Bo. Thinking of him getting slick and fat, almost, except with the real fat kept trimmed because of the Sundays I would take him running all through the woods, and the every morning runs.

Suzy Ellen would come with me on the Sunday runs for the first few hours, dressed in something light because later would be hot, and wearing her tennis shoes. Sometimes we'd lay down in the depth of a big stand of oak and pine and second-growth cottonwood and rest a while and let Bo go on roving. He was getting a nose just for coon. He'd pick up a scent and follow it anywheres. We would lay there on the dark pine needles with the brown crusts of older needles under them and all of a sudden she'd be wild as a mare, and I'd be thinking while we loved, What more could a man want out of life than this? This, and singing the old songs? The earth would smell ripe and clean, and the needles would stick to your hands, but not stabbing, just clean. Out on the water here I could hit on some way to have them two women in a house, not the house Suzy Ellen's dad built, but a place I'd make myself, with clay chinking, a cabin out of good logs with the butt ends mortised with an ax the way my daddy did it in his time, and with them both knowing how it was, and not cat-scratchy about it but just understanding, and me coming home nights after hunting and singing a while. Oh, I knowed it was impossible, just a wishful dream. Hell, that's bigamy, or something maybe worse. But all the same it was a dream put a power of itching in my soul, way down deep, and it made the whole summertime shake and shimmer with its wanting.

And how did Carp Rambo ever come to be beholden to two women, all at the once, or them beholden to him? I shakes my head, giving it up, and pick up the pile of loop that was straightened out and sling it around one fist and get up. Hattram was around to starboard. He had his pole in its harness and socket and was setting with his feet on the rail looking straight ahead of him to the east, and nothing but the path of the sun, white and glaring in a stripe four yards wide on the water, cutting across his vision. Everything at the edges of the sun stripe was blue.

I laid the loop of line down alongside Hattram. I could see aft where Little Eddie, he run the boat, was setting reading a comic book, with his mariner hat on the back of his head and his fancy shirt looking like a sunfish's squiggles in the rays of heat oozing up from the paint and brasswork.

Hattram says: "We're out of any field at all. Either they just aren't biting or they're dead."

I says: "We ain't doing so bad. Snapper, and grouper, and that shark last night." We'd lit into the shark, or him into us, longabout sundown. He'd kicked up a commotion even when we got him over the side, and I'd had to hit him with the pole end of the gaff to knock his brains dead. He was an ugly little one, three feet some inches long, and I had him packed down good in salt and got him laid in the place up under the bow where we stored extra rope and cans of paint. Even so, he'd started to smell. I couldn't for a while mind me what the curl of his mouth bethought me of, and then it come to me: he looked a hell of a lot like John Virgin. I kind of wondered what had happened to old John. He hadn't showed up, all this time. I reckon he was doing wise for himself somewhere though, maybe pimping. I'd vouch he was reliable for an occupation of that sort.

"Suppose we ain't winning any prizes this way," I says, standing alongside Hattram. He was getting a deeper brown, and I had to admit he was a well set figure of a man. If he'd give a real damn about anything, enough to follow it spang to the source the way you trace down a stream, going through anything, why he'd maybe be an entirely different proposition. It was the restlessness in him, like a swallowtail butterfly not able to light and set long enough to see what anything was about, made him that buzzy feisty way sometimes. And I reckon even a butterfly has a better way of looking at things; it don't come with a ready-made bank account. But what made for all the restlessness? It wasn't all bank account, I knowed that much. But it was a sight easier just to draw breath and wait and not try to puzzle it out. Wasn't a thing I could say or do would change him none, so why fret over it?

He shakes his head and spits overside. "No, we sure as

hell aren't. I'm a mind to try for farther north. Those Texas parties hit three sails yesterday."

"We mayn't win prizes, but hell, ain't it kind of good just being here?" I says. "Them Texas people hit lucky. Anyway, where sails has been they ain't going to be again for another week or two." It was a wonder to me he could act like prizes mattered. What did he want with another launch, which was first prize, or a deep-freeze outfit, or a bunch of television sets or such? I don't even reckon the news stories would of meant much to him. He didn't seem to set store by anything like that, I'll say that for him. He looks up at me, and the goggles is black and round and I can't see into his eyes.

Maybe he was chewing over what I says; maybe not. Sometimes you could feel him enjoying himself, all relaxed; then again you could feel the uneasiness in him like a batch of electricity. And sometimes, like now, you couldn't tell nothing at all.

"Better than being some other places, I guess. Hotter, too. Get me a bottle of beer out of the locker, will you, Carp?"

"Sure deal," I says. I went on past him into the cabin. It was dark and cooler in there, but not much cooler. I was saying to myself, That poor son of a bitch, he'd complain about something on the day of the last judgment did they set him on high and turn him loose in the long green pastures. You feel a pity for such people. Not just the pity he didn't give his wife what she wanted, which was a deal more than getting loved well; it was the more than that, that maybe he didn't have to give. That's what made me feel kind of sorry for him. I wondered did he know where he fell short? Or knowing, did he give a good damn? Seems I just couldn't keep from trying to figure him. I don't know why.

I reached in the locker amongst the cracked ice that we got from the station back on the dock, and I drew out a couple bottles and flipped up the opener that hung by a chain there and made set to open them. Then I thought, while I'm here, might as well check the weather. We had a barometer and other things and I liked to check the weather. I turned on the radio in its case above the port side-bunk and waited for her to warm. She crackled and snapped and there was nothing for a spell, then the fel-

low from WLO, the weather station at State Docks, come on and he's saying, ". . . in trouble six miles due south of Fort Gaines on Dauphin Island; all fishing boats in the vicinity please go to assist." I didn't listen to much of the rest. That position he gave was most where we was laying. I left the bottles of beer creaming on the locker and went back to Little Eddie. He knew his business even if he never said much but just give you a grin now and then. He looks up from his comic book and lays his stubby finger in the place to mark it. "WLO," I says. "Somebody's got trouble right nigh us, due south six miles off Fort Gaines, the man says."

"The man say that, he must be nuts," Little Eddie says. "That's us, and we ain't in no trouble far as I know. I ain't seen another boat all this day. You?"

"Not since morning when we left the docks," I says. "All the same, I wasn't hearing things. Maybe we best start up and cruise around a spell and see can we raise her."

"Could be them Texans all got drunked up and fell overboard," Little Eddie says. "I been coming on these damn' rodeos so long I thought I see everything, like the night they set a skiff afire with a gallon of coal oil and then called the Coast Guard to put her out. Check with old grouper bait, will you?"

I says, "Sure deal," and went back to Hattram. On the way I looked up to the deck where Ellen was laying on her belly with her hair tumbled over her arms and the motion of the drifting—not the wind, because there wasn't no wind to put in a thimble—stirring her hair just slight and mild. She had on a little smidge of yellow sunsuit ain't going to discourage the ghost of a mosquito, and the top to that was unhooked, with the loose ends flapped out on the deck. Her naked back was a pure velvety brown all over, like the petal of a soft rose. Her eyes was open and on a level with mine. She lifts her head a little, and I see her breasts hanging firm and good and like growing fruit. She knows I see, and she smiles slow.

"How's everything, Carp?"

"Maybe it could be finer but I don't see how," I said. "Any time you'd like a baby boy child, let me know."

"Twins," she says quiet. "Maybe triplets. And I'd like them just as soon as possible."



"Well, I'm an obliging man," I says. She looks at me and then she lays her head back down and there she is, syrupy and slick and smooth as a petal, just looking at me and smiling slow. I tell you, it wasn't easy, but I went on around to Hattram on the starboard again. He was setting just the way I'd left him, with his sneakers propped up on the rail and that thin, severe expression on his lips, like he'd swallowed down a dose of bitters as a boy and had never quite got the taste off his teeth. Grouper bait, I thought. Sometimes he does look mighty well like that.

I told him what the radio had said, and he mulls it around a space, moving his mouth thoughtful; then: "All right, I guess as citizens of the sea we're supposed to lay to and assist. Let's haul ass. I'll sit here and watch the line and hope something bigger than a shrimp gets attached to it.

"All right," I says. "Best leave it the way it is, fairly close in, and we'll circle wide so's we don't cut it or foul."

"I know that," he says. "Hell, I've been fishing since I was five years old. First time I ever went, there was an ex-President and the Secretary of State along."

I was going to ask how the fishing itself was, but I kept shut. He was paying me and there wasn't any place I'd rather be. He was paying me about twenty a day, which was a sight better than I was getting at the Magnolia even in the best times, so I didn't have no more right to complain than the shark laying in the bow with his mouth curled and drying. I guessed if it made him feel good to talk biggety about an ex-President and the Secretary of State, it wouldn't do me no hurt to listen and keep my thoughts to myself. So all I says is, "Aye," and went on back to Eddie. •

Eddie was already getting set to kick her over. She had a good engine, a big single that could get her up to fair knottage. I watched Little Eddie's wiry arms that was just like a spider's weaving a web, they went that quick, and with the fingers knowing sure what to do to an engine; then he rounded up to the pilothouse and in a minute or so we was churning about, with a cream line at the bows just light and even and steady, moving in a big wide circle. Wasn't a gull or a pelican or a shadow of anything in the sky. I stood up in the bow and watched the horizon. We'd mighty nigh finished the whole first big

circle when I catches what seems like a smoky spot like the cloud shadow a tanker's stacks would make, way off west. I hollered back to Little Eddie and he brings her up. Then he sees it too, and we head due toward it. For what seemed a long time I thought, No, it's a tanker and that's all. But then the smoke was too high to be from any stacks, and a minute later we could see it clear. It's a launch like ours, maybe a little bigger, and it's afire from stem to stern.

## CHAPTER XI

THE DAMN' SMOKE was bellying out of her so's you caught your breath. It was going most straight up because of the no wind. I felt gooseflesh prickle up my arms and I says, "That's her fuel, or if it ain't it will be pretty quick." And then on the heels of that, I thinks: No, it couldn't be her tanks yet; we'd of heard the boom. But they'll go any minute now.

I guess the launch had been a slick clean one like ours, only bigger, like I said. The flames was yellow-white in the strong sun, and I couldn't see nobody aboard. You could hear her burn over the sound of our own engine when we come closer. Little Eddie, he was shoving down on the speed, choking her in closer. We was going about three-quarters, then half, then a quarter speed, and I hoped with part of me he wouldn't cut our engines because I didn't want to be anywheres around there when she blew. I seen what was left of one once at the State Docks, and it was just splinters where there was anything left at all. A guy who was standing nigh her when she went got his legs ripped off at the knee, and he was lucky to have just that done to him, they says.

I was gripping the wood of the bulwark at the bow where it comes to a little point there, and even though there wasn't the smidge of a breeze the stench of burning

come fanning to my nose. Ellen, she'd got up on the rear deck, and I could see her, kind of cornerwise, like a shadow, standing there holding the sunsuit top up and looking straight and dark as an arrow against the sky.

I hollers back to Eddie, "Hold her about here, I want to see—"

He stops the forward speed all the way. The momentum carries us a little way, the water still bow-lipping but not so hard, and I figured he was set to reverse when it come needful. I was up on the little bit of decking on the bow, kneeling down, looking hard under squinched-up eyelids, the sun so strong and the flames bright and the flecks of oily soot rolling around the glittery water and tarnishing it like a disease broke out sudden-like. I couldn't see nothing alive.

To the west just a little ways was a mound of land, just a gray-blueness against the deeper blue of the water, one of them little islands don't even get listed on the maps, nothing the size of Dauphin Island, just a lump of earth setting there like a stepping-stone against the horizon with everything around it stretching away in the arms of the living daylight and the breathing water. I looked hard, and seems I see another couple of blobs farther out from the burning launch, but I ain't sure are they smaller islands or just pieces of black-soaked gear or something human. I shadowed my eyes with my hands and kneeled there and wished I had time to go back in the cabin and get the 'scope, but there wasn't any time at all if we was going to be any help. There wasn't going to be any salvage or nothing you could do for the launch itself when the fire hit the fuel, and that was going to be real soon. All we could do was hope to find whoever had been on her if they'd had sense enough to get off. There sure as hell wasn't a boat in sight. I could of seen a dinghy; it would of rid high enough over the water line to make out. But you take a body in the water, it's harder to see, specially with the sun glaring down and winking and them speckles of debris black-littering the water. But with my hands scooped over my eyes I could see after a minute that the blobs was moving, and not just with the current either, or with any swell.

I yells, "Turn her, Eddie, and head out there," and pointed with my whole arm. I reckon we was about two

hundred yards aft of the launch when there was a sudden huge *foom*, and she blew.

There was a great shooting spout like a whale might've put up, only yellow-white and then pure golden white against the sun, and pieces of the launch flying high in the air as the Waterman Steamship Company building downtown. They looked like they was turning over lazy as last leaves floating off a cottonwood, the way they come down, like little propellers got all the time in the nation, and the big chunks went just as high as the little ones. I wanted to duck my head, but some way I couldn't; I had to watch with my mouth agape like a fool watching a show, and something sick turning over in me the way it does when you see anything go almighty smash like that. I was cricked around so sharp and froze that way, I like to bust my neck. Then I heard the chunks hit when they come down, *sizz* when they hit the water; and one was a piece of brass flew by like a bullet except you could feel the heat and you can't with a bullet. I yells to Ellen: "Watch and see nothing burning hit us! If it does, clear it off deck; use the landing net and scoop it off fast!"

Out of the corner of my eye I see her move and come around to the front of the cabin and grab the scoop net leaning there, moving fast without no arguments, and that's a rarity in a woman, any woman. But I couldn't watch or help her because now I was searching the water up nigh that puny little patch of a rise out of the surface of the sea that wasn't a real island but just a land daub. And between us and that little rise there was sure-enough blobs in the water, four of them, no, five, one way ahead of the rest. They was people; we was close enough for me to see now. They was all swimming. I could make out the ones back farthest from the rise pretty clear, and I wondered crazy things like, What did that sound like to them in the water? You can kill fish with a concussion like that; they just come up a-boiling when there's a dynamite explosion, and used to be people would kill whole flat-cars full of them that way till the law stopped it. But I reckoned them swimmers had got a head start and was far enough away just to feel a jar in the water and maybe not much else.

I was stripping my jeans off while I was watching now, and I hollers back to Little Eddie, "They heading for that



there little island; bring her up close as you can!" Then I kicked my jeans the rest of the way off and didn't even consider I was mother-naked except to note it like a blur in passing, and I hit the water fast, diving shallow. It was warm up top and then cold a few feet under. When I surfaced I opened my eyes and see I was aiming right and set thrashing off for the people.

Behind me I could hear Eddie hollering, "Lay her up right into the island; they's a cove," and I knowed he was telling me what he would do and not even knowing did I hear him, so I lifted an arm and trod water for a second and waved. It was buoy-you-up water, nice swimming except it tasted of oil, and I could feel a slick coating of oil over my ribs and down my legs and thick in my hair. Our launch looked big and high, like a regular steamer from the water here, and up near the bow was Ellen and Hattram, both of them just sharp-cut shadows against the clean blue of the sky. The sky looking so wide and smily and unconcerned.

I turned and struck out again and I reckoned I could be up to them pretty quick. They wasn't moving at all fast. I guessed they didn't have no time to even think about life jackets, let alone the dinghy that must've gone with the launch, because they didn't have that corky high-riding motion; they was all down in it and laboring toward the island that didn't look to be near as close as it had from the launch. None of them seemed to have noticed we was right behind them.

First one I come to, the last in the straggling line they was making, he had a little sailory kind of hat on, soaked but still stuck to the back of his head, and he was a-wal-ling along just like a porpoise when it plays, except he wasn't playing. He was churning and splashing and spitting more of the Gulf than he was swimming through; he had chubby arms, and a white shirt was plastered to him and his face was a kind of boiled bright red in the water. I swum up and I says, "Grab on me from the back. . . . Take it easy, just lay light along the back. . . . Take it calm now, float, just ease around here. . . ." Hell, he was spooked. I thought right there and then he'd have a heart attack or something. He was one spooked customer. He flapped his arms, never stopping, just flipflap up and down like chubby little millwheels churning, and his

chubby hands on the ends of them flapping even harder, sending up jets of spray around his head. "Hold still!" I hollered. "Nothing ain't going to hurt you. The water'll keep you up if you just hold still and lay forward! Haunch up on my back there now, not too hefty or we'll both go under. . . . Now, that's it." I ain't no prime wonderful swimmer, but that bastard thought you had to kill yourself to move any. He liked to killed me too. He would never of made that little island alone, no more'n a cat in a sack. I hoped the rest was better shaped than him to swim. Finally I could feel him easing down though, slumping, kind of, and I tried again: "Now lay hold of my shoulders. Just let yourself drift out flat in the water. . . . Just keep on breathing . . . and breathe slow. Don't do a damn' thing but hold on. . . . You hear?"

He gasps, "What about—my boat?" Then he just puffs a while, hanging on tight to me. I couldn't see his face. I could feel the sun burning the water off my own face and stiffening my hair. The water tasted sour. It puckered my throat and made me a sight thirsty. I thought of them two cold beers I left creaming back on the locker. He rasps out, "My boat—she all right?" I knowed then he was either out of his head from shock or else he hadn't felt the explosion none. He coughed and spit. I could feel the spit cling to me and I ducked my head a little to wash it off. He was behind me now, laying tight to my shoulders, not as light as he could but not so weighty I couldn't drag him along. I swum toward the little island with them big long strokes you do when you're carrying something. When I was a little tad in the Chickasabogue River we'd used to swim like that, finding good logs and such had floated down, and easing them back to shore, excepting a log is more cooperative than a damned human who's spooked. I was mad at him and at the same time was sorry for him. I could see the launch over my shoulder, black on the sky, in shadow, going slow, and even as I looked for that one switch of a second I see somebody dive, Ellen, I reckoned, and I guessed she spied somebody else in bad shape.

I says to my passenger: "What you care about the launch for? You're in the water. More'n she is."

And over my shoulder, gasping tired, spooked and like to die, sputtering and spraying water all over me when

he says it, he moans: "She wasn't fully insured. Oh, damn it, I had only about half-coverage on her." He was most crying.

I says: "Lay back and shut up or I'll crack your jaw for you. You'd be a hell of a sight easier to cart in thataway."

I didn't say nothing more, and he laid back flat and we plowed on toward the island. It was a dazzlement to even think of that poor sad chubby silly little bastard fretting about his insurance when he'd maybe of drowned in another few minutes. You think you have people generally figured out, but then something downright outlandish happens along and just lays to you where you live, and you think, God's got more patience than even the preachers know. Else how come He let them live this long, all wrapped up in themselves, without He hits them dead with lightning? I just couldn't bear to even think about this monkey saying that about his launch, so I pretended he hadn't said it and I was carrying a sack of wet meal by hooks that was padded with rubber sponge attached to my shoulders. We got along better that way. He didn't say nothing more but had the sense to stay silent while we come in and I groped for the sand underfoot as it sloped up to the little runty patch of island, with its few bit-looking trees, that was all the dry land there was for what looked like a million miles.

I was setting alongside Little Eddie about an hour later, I'd judge, on a mound where the island rose up on the west side. It wasn't much of a place. The sand of it was dirty gray except just before it shelved to water, and then it got a rusty tan. There was a grove of stunky little water willows and a palm or so all clustered up toward the northwest side, in a circle there, like they was sheep huddled together, shaking and quivering and telling each other how the next real wind would haul them up by the roots and cast them all out in the Gulf. The island was maybe a quarter-mile long, not longer, and about half that wide. It was just a spit of land that the water hadn't been quite deep enough to cover, was all. I reckon the only place it ever showed was on the Lord's navigation chart. You couldn't see nothing but water, and the water had that harsh feel it has when you're too near it and not in the shade. I was burned enough and blacked down so's

was nothing to dwell on. But now he was wrapped in linseed oil and unguent and cotton we had in the medicine locker, and Ellen said he'd be all right except we ought to get him back to a hospital soon's we could make it. The other two in the bunks was just falling-down tired and was taking it easy there in the cool—or in the cool-as-it-was-going-to-get, up to sundown. They was business friends of Mister Fillgan's. The other one that was down the line jawing with Fillgan and Hattram, he was Doone Crockett. Hell, I'd seen him around town most of my life except when he was off in New York City or somewheres. He was about fifty-eight or nine, and he was a poet.

I reckon there's all kinds of poets just like there's all kinds of fishermen. So I ain't saying nothing against them as a body.

He could talk the pants off the fat lady at the circus and make her throw in a hair bow too, though. I could hear him gassing up there with Hattram and Fillgan now. Ellen, she was aboard the launch, seeing what she could do to make them three there comfortable, specially James Dee, who really needed it. The sky was just a big blue thing going endless, and it looked like it would be sunlight for ever.

I says, to make Eddie look a little less sorry and slumped down: "Damn it, it ain't your fault, Eddie. We was bound to run over some bit of drift. That boat must've blew to a thousand pieces."

"Sure," he says, poking with his stick. "But the piece we fouled on had to get tangled in the damn' screw."

"Well," I says, "we'll figure some way out. I reckon they got the Coast Guard out looking for that launch now, and they'll find us, too. And there'll be planes and things out looking. You positive she's the screw?"

"I could feel her when she hit, and nothing to do about it. If we hadn't had a little motion under way we'd never of made it in here. It either sheared off a blade or else got fouled in the screw channel and is sticking there, and that'll burn out her bearings sure as Sunday if I try to race her out."

It seemed lonesome and us tiny as a bunch of ants there in the sun on that little scrap of land. There'd been planes buzzing around, in the last few minutes, but they was way off yonder, closer to where Dauphin Island must



it couldn't really burn me, but I could feel a sting on my ears and the tips of my elbows.

Little Eddie had brought our launch up into the small cove, hardly no more than a V of a place with just room for the launch to fit between the shelves of sand that caved down on both flanks, and even then the launch looked big and mighty with her bow sticking there like a knife cutting through hoecake. The whole island looked just like that, like an old piece of dough on the blade of a hoe's been thrust into the ashes, and the ashes hadn't been scraped or blowed off yet. It sure was hot enough to of been in coals, too. I didn't move, but just sat there with my bottom the only place that was at all cool, not even rolling from one side to the other because that would burn.

The cove wasn't deep enough to bring the launch in the rest of the way, and her stern end stuck out in the open water. Eddie had anchored her, and he was setting there beside me sorry-faced and poking with a piece of splintered wood that I reckon was from the other launch and had washed up. He made holes with it in the sand like a sand crab's. Three of them we'd brought out of the water was in the three bunks on the launch. The other two, including the one I'd wrestled out of the water, was ashore, but farther down, setting talking to Hattram. They was all men. Mister Fillgan, he was the one I'd pulled ashore, was a stockbroker from Chicago, Illinois, and now he'd got his breath and seen he was going to be kicking around a spell longer he was just as right as a rainbow, except he was still sorry for himself about his yacht. Well, hadn't been nobody killed, at that.

See, the fire got started by the cook in the galley—they have little tinpot galleys on them launches that the skipper of a fishing smack would laugh at—he was a nigger, name of James Dee, and he'd been firing up something when the stove, a gas contraption, went bust on him. Knocked him back and out of the galley and halfway up the galley hatch, and that saved him, because the gas spread, way it will. In next to no time the whole launch was afire and they all skedaddled. James Dee, he was the only one got really burned. He had it on the chest and across the arms, and what any more water would of done to him, burned as he was, and the sun searing him after,

have been, only you couldn't see Dauphin; we was too far off for that.

I says: "Well, Eddie, in a minute I'll wade out and scrooch down around under the stern and maybe I can see something. Might be we could pull whatever's on the screw, or in the screw channel, out of there and get to hellangone in a hurry."

"I feel bad," he said. He didn't look at me. "Not Hat-tram. Hell, he's going to think it was my fault; but he ain't going to say it and he ain't about to fire me, neither. But that nigger ought to be getting to the hospital. I'll go with you to look at the screw." He let out a long breath. "I tried racing her just for a spell in reverse after we coasted in. She wouldn't turn a-tall. She just froze. I could smell her burning, so I shut her off. I sure do feel sorry about that nigger."

"I figure we done about all we can for him and maybe everything a hospital could," I says. I watched him punch some more holes with his stick. "Wait here a minute, then we'll both go look."

I stood up. He went right on prodding the sand, and he says: "It do seem the working man gets it in the ass every time, don't it? If they hadn't had that nigger cooking, hadn't had to have their food hot, why, they'd still have their nice new launch and we'd be just as we was. But they had to have it, so the nigger got himself burned."

I says: "I don't know, Eddie. They could of got burned just as easy as him. He just happened to be by when the stove busted."

"Yeah," Eddie says. He spit. The backs of his hands was leathery and slick as oiled paper. They hung drooped between his knees. "I just feel sorry, is all."

I knowed how he felt, all right. Still and all, I felt glad we was all whole and in one piece even if maybe Fillgan, and them like him, didn't merit it; you couldn't help feeling glad, even though it was a mean island and not fit for nothing but to wait on. I walked back through the grayish sand, powder-soft underfoot, but packed hard beneath. I'd got my jeans on again, but that was all I was wearing or needed right now. A part of my gladness that we was all there, and fairly sound, was a strong shoot of feeling like a branch on a tree in deep summer, a feeling of pride the way Ellen had dove in and helped the nig-

ger get ashore. She was a lot more than a woman you liked to sleep with. A good lot more.

I wanted to speak to Hattram a minute and ask was it all right to bring the four big bottles of water ashore and sink them in a kind of brackish but cool creek that was snuggled down among the tree stand and that I'd found a while back. I was walking along past the bow of the launch when Ellen come on deck. She'd slung on a rain-cape kind of affair to keep the sun off, and she stood there looking down at me. A piece of soot was smeared on one cheek. She put a hand on the rail and vaulted down. She did move nice; nice and light and all of a piece. Even now, tired and hot and uncomfortable as I felt, it was a wonder to watch her.

She smoothed her hair back off her face and says: "I was listening to the radio. They haven't sighted anything and they don't seem anywhere near us yet." She took my arm and kind of pressed it like a man would.

We looked at each other a second, and it seemed to me the two of us was tiny as nothing under the sky, tiny and nothing anyone ashore could think twice about, but, same time, even under all the sky, we was big in our aloneness and big, being together.

We walked on slow and side by side to where Hattram and Fillgan and that Doone Crockett was standing yammering near the tangle of skimpy trees under the selfsame sky.

## CHAPTER XII

FILLGAN, HE'D BEEN setting down a minute before and his white duck pants hadn't dried out yet and there was sand crusted across his butt—he stepped toward me and holds out his hand. "Young man," he says. I took his hand because there wasn't anything else to do. It felt kind of pulpy. He put his other hand on the back of mine and

held it clasped so. He looks at me like he's going to cry, but at the same time he's all perked up and rainbowing all over the place. "Young man, I can't ever thank you enough. I might not have made it to shore. I'm not the swimmer I used to be. I've taken life-saving courses in my time, but the knowledge just deserted me in that crisis."

There wasn't nothing I could think of to say, but I tried to get my hand loose. He just kept right on clasping it though, looking at me steamy-eyed. Then he let one of his hands slide off and he reached around in a hip pocket and fished up a wallet, one of those kind have places for pictures of your sweetheart or wife and kids and your driver's license and the clubs you belong to and a special compartment for keeping wild thousand-dollar bills hid from brigands and such. He flipped it open. It was wet but the inside looked in pretty fair shape. I snaked my hand out of his finally. Doone Crockett and Hattram stood there looking on. Ellen was over by some willows where they come up in a clump, the rain cape wrinkled around her throat where she held it with one hand. The launch in the V of the cove swung a little on its anchor but not much, just light and quiet in the swell. It was so hot that you could see little waves changing what you looked at on the deck of the launch and making brassy spears of color shoot from the metal and bite to your eye.

I waited while this Fillgan, he fumbled in the wallet. It seemed a long while. I was trying to be mortal polite. He scrounged around and brought up two bills; then he kind of folded one of them over with the knuckle of his first finger like he hadn't meant it to be there in the first place, and knife-shaped the other in both hands and pushed it at me like it was a gold cup I had won for doing some golfing or something similar. Like he was going to make a speech for sure. He says: "I know you can't put a price tag on a man's life, but money talks, and—here, son, take it. Take it for the sake of a man who owes you his life."

Well, that was quite a speech. I looked at the fifty-dollar bill in his fingers and I thought a good many things in them few seconds. I thought how I best take it because if I didn't it would make trouble; he'd get huffy and decide I was a Yankee hater, the way a good many them



Yankees think if you get personal enough with them as to be just sociably arguing. I thought too that if I took it, it would mean just about what he thought his life was worth to him, in terms of cash. It was way too bad he'd even started to think in terms of cash. It wasn't right to pay anything to anybody for saving you, and for a man owned a launch like his to ease one bill out of a lot more like them, well, it was himself he was insulting. All the same it made me mad. And all the same I took it.

I says: "It's all right. How you, Doone? You need any first aid?" I stuck the fifty on one finger and wrapped it around there.

Doone Crockett, he smiles kind of loose and vague. "We came through in excellent shape, Carp. But I was just telling my friends, it's nothing to what our ancestors did. Did you know Tristan de Luna was marooned without food or water on this very island for ten days in 1524?"

"He may of been without food," I says. "I don't know nothing about history except what I hear. But he sure hell wasn't without water. You move forty feet over, you'd be standing in the middle of a stream. It ain't much and it's brackish, but it is drinkable."

Crockett, he didn't care for simple rude facts like that. "He was finally brought off this place by some members of his fleet who'd stayed loyal. This is Goat Island, a really fabulous spot. Bet you didn't know you were standing on Goat Island, did you, Carp?"

I says, "No, before God, I didn't."

Crockett, he folds his arms and nods, and says kind of like a wind hushing along through trees, "I'd like to recite you all a poem about Tristan de Luna. Clint, you know anything about him?"

"Well," Hattram says, his eyes looking that light shrewd hard blue like he was about to enjoy himself, "I heard he was a fake, that there wasn't any such. That's what I heard, Crockett."

And right then, seeing the look on Hattram's face, a notion struck me that made sound good sense. Hattram didn't care for Crockett, you could tell that, no more'n he cared for me. But it come out in different ways, because the reasons was different. I figured he maybe hated Crockett because some ways he was like him. Lost some

way, like him. And so he hated me because I wasn't so lost and because he wanted to be more like me and couldn't. It was a thought swift as a running hare, and I didn't put words to it right then. But I felt it for a true thing didn't need no torch to light up clear.

Crockett turned around to Ellen. "Mrs. Hattram, *you* have heard?"

"I'm sorry, Doone," she says. "Just a little, I'm afraid. Just what everybody knows. But I'm sure he existed."

She looked tired and lovely both together.

Crockett shook his head, and drew in a breath, and straightened himself a little. Then he looked out to where the sun was hot and hurting your eyes on the water and he says, soft and gentle: "Tristan de Luna. By Doone Crockett."

Then come the poem:

"Illimitably"—(or something like that)

"Tristan

Gazing

Outstretchingly tern-eyed onward

Into mammoth cycles of infinite vision

Toward samite grails

Upon the sea."

He turned toward Ellen again. "Mrs. Hattram?"

Ellen smiles at him. "I like it. Thank you, Doone."

"I liked it too," Hattram says. Crockett wheeled around a little toward him. "I liked it just at the place it ended, right after that."

Crockett moved back a little ways and nodded, gentle and distant, and damn me, I felt sorry for him.

I says to Hattram: "We got only so much ice in the lockers and it's going down fast. Don't look to me like there's going to be any big rescue right away. Eddie told you about the screw on the launch—"

"Yes," he says. "If we had a spare screw . . . but we haven't."

"Well," I says, fiddling with the bill around my finger, "I'm going with Eddie to look at that in a minute or so. Maybe we can do something about it. But the ice. I was wondering, shouldn't we bring the water bottles

and sink them in this creek? That way they'll stay cool, and it will save the ice too."

"Whatever you think," he says. "Hell, I never thought I'd be hung up here." He wrinkles his nose. His eyes had that off-in-the-distance suspicious look they got sometimes. "Goat Island," he says. He half laughed. "Go ahead, Carp, whatever you and Eddie think. It's a damned shame we didn't have two-way phones installed, though. *They* had them." He jerked his elbow toward Mister Fillgan. "That's how they called the marine station. But they didn't give their position the way they should have. Did you, Fillgan?"

Something in him, an itchy, nervy thing, made him want to jump somebody. Maybe it was really me he wanted to jump, and that because Ellen was there. But if it was, he held back for some reason. Maybe it was too long a jump, and he wasn't ready for it yet; meantime it was shorter and easier to get to Fillgan.

Fillgan says: "Well, now, Mister Hattram, there wasn't the time, you see. We were all crazy to get off."

I says, "Who was running her?"

Fillgan says, "Mister Moore. He's resting up on your launch, now."

"Did Mister Moore shut off the engines when the fire broke?" I asked him.

"Well, now . . . he's an experienced seaman. He had a launch of his own for five years, running it out of Montrose Harbor in Chicago. If he didn't shut them off I'm sure it was only because we were all just crazy to get away from the fire. You can't expect a man to use his better judgment, a time like that."

"I'll get the bottles," I says.

I walked away from them. The sand felt hot as a slate roof at noon. You could feel a little wave of coolness that wasn't near cool enough coming from the stand of trees on the right where the stream was. It didn't have much of a chance against the water heat of the Gulf that settled down around you thick and rich and heavy as a wool blanket. It itched the inside of your nose and made your eyes burn. I figured Mister Moore and the other gent on the launch with James Dee was best off where they was. I figured it wouldn't be a pleasant time if we was all to stick around there for too long.

Ellen stayed back there watching me go. I could feel it. There was this flow of something between us. I would of liked to take her down to the soft brush around the little creek where there was at least some little shade and forget about Hattram and Crockett and Fillgan and all the rest except maybe little Eddie and James Dee for a while. Just to be with her and maybe not even making love or touching, but just sit quiet together and talk if we had a mind to, or not. For two cents I would of done it, too. Doone Crockett, he followed me up a little way. I reckoned he wanted company. I didn't say a word for a spell because I didn't have nothing to say to him, nothing special. I was still twisting the fifty-dollar bill around my finger and once, I noticed him looking at it and then he looked away fast like he wouldn't of wanted me to think he was even thinking about it. He was lost, all right, but in some ways nice. While an idea started coming to me, I says: "It's lucky you're all still living, Doone. Just as healthy as you was when you started, except for the cook."

"Yes," he says. "And he's a fine boy. One of those lanky niggers, hard to kill."

I've said "nigger" all my life and never meant no harm nor meanness by it. It just come natural, and saying anything else would feel wrong and like a wall between me and them. Crockett, he says it just right, too. There's some people oughtn't be allowed to say it, because they don't use it right.

I says: "He's bound for a tough time, hospital expenses and such. You reckon twenty-five or so'd help him out, time he gets back to the town?"

Crockett nods. We'd stopped walking. All the things that boiled around in my head to say, and that I didn't say, had to do with the point that Doone Crockett had a pretty tough time himself. He was trying to work at his trade, but I figured the truth was, plain out, he wasn't very good at it. And for all his talking, he couldn't beg. Them beggars on Royal just stand back, and they're proud, kind of, just holding out the cups and to hell with you if you don't feel like giving anything and to hell with you even if you do, but a to-hell with a blessing in it. But there's other kinds of beggars too shy and at the same time too proud in the soul to do that.



I held out the bill. "Here's a fifty, and I'd rather it would go this way. Split it with the nigger when you all get back on shore. See he gets his half when he needs it in the hospital. All right?"

"If—" he starts to say. "If there's a real feeling that you want me to . . . I mean . . ."

"Look," I says. "Nobody knows about it. You and me, and for all the nigger will know, the twenty-five comes from you. He'll need it. You need it. I don't want it. You know what I was going to do?"

"No."

"I was going to throw it away. I figured that would of give me something, seeing it scatter out free, all tore up and bobbing on the Gulf water. That would of done me more good than thinking of Fillgan taking it out of his wallet. But this is doing some extra good."

He took it slow. "I'll see that Dee receives his part."

"Good."

"And thank you, Carp. Thanks. I—" I started to walk away and he was still standing there. I waited, and he looked at me with that far-away smile. "Did *you* like the poem, Carp?"

"Sure. I thought it was a hell of a good poem. I hope you make up a lot more."

It come to me that he might, too. And they might be better and more like living. Crockett turned and walked away slow, over the burning sand. I went on down to where little Eddie was still setting, still punching holes with his stick.

"Well," he says, "what's the program?"

"Just like before," I says. "I'm going to get the bottles and sink them in the creek back there in the trees. Carry a couple of them if you want."

"All right," Eddie says. He stood up. "I'm getting damned tired of this island already," he says. "It ain't even good squatting. They'd ought to take a bomb and let some of them boys from Brookley go to work on her for a target. Way she is, she's only a shipping menace."

"I don't reckon many ships get anywhere close to this island anyhow, Eddie. It's off the main lanes. But you wouldn't want to go bombing it now. Hell, it's a damn' famous island."

"Sure enough? For what, sand flies?"

"This here's Goat Island," I says. "Tristan de Luna, he landed here once. Doone was just telling about it."

He gives me a look. "Goat Island," he says. "You all don't believe that pure prime hogwash, do you? If ever a goat got on this island it was one in human form. That Crockett's got a head full of steam." We scuffed along a little and he laughed. "Goat Island. Why, a goat itself, randy as he might be, couldn't hardly get up the energy to shove a nanny, not in the heat of this here stunted-down busted little spit of land. This here is Pud Point. The end of the line and no place to dabble." He laughed and I laughed too. We swung up on the launch and started into the cabin for the bottles. She was swinging, just a bit, in the swell, and she was hot on deck but cooler in the cabin, and there was nothing in the sky but that big smile it gives you, with the heat in the middle like a furnace that isn't ever going to go out.

After we'd stowed the bottles in the creek with just their mouths showing and seen the stoppers was in good, we swum out, wading first, to where the stern swung high above us. Eddie hung to a rope back there and I dove down. I flipped down and kept my eyes open. A few feet under, just like before, only not hurrying this time, it was nice and cool. I could see some little fishes, a whole school, that was shaped like leaves, with tails and bodies you could most see through and striped so fresh it looked like the colors had just been laid on. Their eyes walled at me and they all turned the same direction at once with a neat flutter, flick, like that. I got myself down to the screw and looked at her. It looked different than when a boat's in drydock. There was a greenish mirroring kind of motion around the brass, and the blades when I touched them felt strange, like they belonged to the water and not to anything man-made. Way up I could see Eddie's legs dangling in the water with air bubbles along them. They looked skinny like the rest of him, and canted all to one side. They looked white and far away up there. I hung to one of the blades. The screw sure seemed in solid, and I reached in and felt around back with two fingers. There was a jam-up in there, felt like string or net around where the screw joined the shaft and went up the channel. I wondered if Hattram had

let his line out too far and we had run over her after all and she was clogging. Whatever it was I couldn't snag it out.

When I come up Eddie said he'd try, and down he went. I watched him go frogging down, breast-stroking to keep himself headed right, and then tip himself up and hold onto the screw. For that first second or so the air was cool on my shoulders, just before the sun burned it off. Looking along the port side of the launch I could see her green water line tremble where the water broke against it and her shadow laying quiet as glass off to the side and the little things about her, like the chair Eddie'd been sitting on back in the stern, all looking queer and like paintings of themselves in that pooled shadow. And ashore I saw Ellen. She had come down close to the water, on the fringe of sand where it changed color, losing the gray look. We looked at each other, a long deep look, and never smiled. The sun put a gold haze around her, like she was carved out of gold and was meant to last forever. She'd set the raincape back off her shoulders, and it hung gleaming around her body. She was leaning forward just a touch, quiet and tense at the same time, and I guess I leaned out toward her too: I felt all brought together and ready inside, like a clock all wound up, and right then I knew it was going to be tonight. It had to be, if I got killed for it. The slow lift and fall of the water under me was like the Gulf itself was nodding Yes and Yes. I never moved a muscle, but shouting it to her couldn't of made it plainer.

Then she give herself a little shake and turned sharp and started walking away. Her bare legs was a motioning blur of gold through the light raincape, and her hair was bright and black, black as night.

## CHAPTER XIII

ABOUT SIX O'CLOCK, when the sun was really westering at last and you could stand it better on the main body of the island, some pelicans come flapping over. First off, I thought they was planes. We'd worked all afternoon trying to free the screw. Sometimes it seemed we'd be getting at that tangle of line or whatever it was in there, but no, it was really plugged up. I went in the cabin around six to see how James Dee was doing. His eyes was wide open and staring up at the bottom of the bunk over his. The man in the top bunk was one of Fillgan's friends, a big gray shock-haired man name of George Snively, and I guess there was nothing really wrong with him except he was still sort of pole-axed by the whole thing. His fingers kept working on the tail of his plaid sport shirt and he just grunted a little when I says hello. The other was Mister Moore, the navigator, who had forgot to shut his engines off in his tearing hurry to get away. He was thin and had a face like a white horse in a pasture looking over a bobwire fence solemn and deep at you. He asked me to bring him a little food, "A cracker or something, son," when I could get around to it. I told him in the interests of conserving food we'd probably wait to eat right after sundown if we hadn't been taken off the island by then. He says all right. It was strange seeing them middle-aged men all flustered and flummoxed by what they'd gone through, which in actual fact wasn't much considering they was hale as ripe cherries now, a-laying on their backs and thanking their stars they was kicking and yet still too scared to move much, the way a rabbit will freeze for a long time after whatever's been chasing him has gone on by. I guess Fillgan was made different; I don't know if I liked him any better for it, though. The nigger, Dee, was the only one had a right to a relapse. He laid there stiff and staring. Ellen had done a good job with the bandages.

I says, "Any time you'd like a cup of broth or some-



thing . . ." and Dee rolls his head toward me. He give a faint kind of grin, but he meant it.

"I don't need nothin' at all, boss. I don't need to go to no hospital, neither."

"Well," I told him, "you best let them decide that when we get you there. You never can tell with a burn."

"I got a brother was burned worse'n this, there in the Navy. He was in the black gang," he says. "Workin' down below when the boilers go. Was a bomb made them go. You 'member them kamikaze in the war, them suiciders?"

"Yes," I says. "I didn't get nowheres out of the country in the war; I was in just about six months toward the very tail end of it, and I had to lie about my age to get that much. Too young, and besides they said I got flat feet." I leaned against the bunk post. "Fort Leonard Wood. Hell, that was the hole of the world."

"I didn't get in her neither," James Dee says. "But I reckon I will this trip; my number's comin' up before I'm much older. But you make them keep me off that hospital bed, boss. You do that."

"Well," I told him, "I'm happy you feel that way. I'll tell little Eddie. He's kind of the captain, this launch. He felt bad about not being able to get you back sooner."

"Oh, I'm kind of layin' here enjoyin' myself, just thinkin' about things like ain't goin' to bother nobody. Just kind of goin' over things. That stove go blooie, like to frightened me to a sure death. But this little burn, it'll pass."

"Good boy," I says. I grinned at him. He was one all-right boy. That burn was wide enough. It must of hurt the hell out of him, like fire stretching in the skin, pulling and tautening spite of the oil and the unguent and such. The other two, Snively and Moore, they just laid there like spilled mush.

The launch rocked slow in the swell. The swells was heftier as the afternoon wore on. I went out on deck again and looked to the island. A canvas from our stores was rigged about a hundred feet from the patch of woods, and in the shade of it Hattram and Fillgan and Crockett was sitting. Ellen was around back of the woods, keeping off by herself.

She was a lone kind of person like me, content to be just on her own most of the time: not lone like a cat, but more like a solitary bird in the air contained inside itself.

And yet under that lonesomeness was a wanting, a need for something outside herself, to take in and make a part of herself. She'd been looking and looking for it—and now I'd come along, I wondered could she stop looking. I hoped so. It made a ball of heat deep and solid in me under the ribs. That's a good kind of living warmth, not like the sun when you get too much of it, but an inwards heat kicking and forcing the life out of you into the open air.

I walked back to the rear deck and dropped off again in the water and helped Eddie again for a spell, but, like I say, we couldn't unjam that plugged-up screw.

It was right then that the pelicans come. There was a dozen of them in a long line like planes in the distance. I was hanging on to the rope when I first see them, and Eddie was underwater. I was fixing to yell for him to come up, but then I seen what they were. They didn't make any noise at all, just sailing in quiet from the northeast, dark against the red of the sun setting slow across the water. It had three hours to go yet before it would really be down, but the path it made was fiery gold and wider than before, like a big gay collar around the whole throat of the Gulf, and the rays dancing off it on each side was like the folds of a cloak alongside that main collar. So you couldn't see naught but the shadows of the birds coming in at first. That was why I thought, Planes! But then they didn't make any noise and kept coming, and I felt funny, shivery-like, like they was something I and no man ever seen before. Then I thought quick, Gliders. But they wasn't that either; the wings was moving. Then of course I see what they were. I've seen a mort of pelicans pass by, but you mainly see them off the Gulf in the later sunset when they are grayer and more like a melted and running part of the sky itself. But this time they was clean and clear and big as ships in the sky. They come in over the launch so close their shadows covered my face one by one—a flick of sunlight in my eyes and then the next shadow. Their legs was tucked up like they do, and them big bills was thrust down low and their eyes had that squinty, sly satisfied look they have. They was a gray blue the color of ground mist when it gets thick around you, and now, this close, I could hear the wings, and it was like, almost, being right up there

with them in the red afternoon air for a few beating seconds.

I looked along the line of the launch to shore, but I couldn't see Ellen. I could feel her, though, as strong as if she was standing alongside me.

Some real planes buzzed again in the distance just at sunset, but they was way off, so far you couldn't see them. The radio just kept giving the same bulletin. Nobody come to pull us off. Night started gentling down the Gulf. I got the feeling only part of me was Carp Rambo and part was somebody bigger. I was going to be with her in the dark this selfsame night. That was all I could think of. It was like those birds flying, those big slow knowing-where-they-was-going pelicans. I set on the rear deck with Eddie while he dripped off from the last try and we watched the sun head down. Neither of us said a thing.

## CHAPTER XIV

IT GOT COOL with the dark. The sand gleamed in the first afterlight of the sun's going down, then shaded to gray-black. For a while it was full dark and not much moon, and then the moon come up the sky slow and bone-white and by and by more stars pricked out than you ever remember there are in the sky until you get out on the water. The water itself had cooled and felt soupy and warm to the touch and kind of gracious.

I waded up on shore. Hattram and Fillgan and Doone Crockett was breaking off little bits and pieces of what willow wood they could find. There was one big worm-eaten chunk of drift that looked like it could make a fair blaze for a spell, but it would burn itself out in a hurry too. I felt fine, not cold like you usually feel in the sudden cool after the heat of that sun.

I'd gathered up some things from the launch, a couple of cans of beans and one of beef and a bunch of biscuits

ready-made in a box and a coffeepot and the strainer and a half-pound of coffee, and Eddie had brought a box of crackers and a slab of cheese. Clint come lugging a hand-full of willow splints and dumped them down and squatted across from me. I couldn't see his eyes good, but I could tell he was looking at me. I looked back at him steady. Then I says: "You take a knife and cut off slivers from this big chunk of driftwood here, you'll get her started enough to burn the green stuff too. Damn, there sure ain't much in the way of firewood."

Seemed like he wasn't going to make a move; he just hunkered there. Behind him Fillgan looked chilly and clamp-jawed. Hattram, though, he was used to Gulf nights, the way they get cold out on the water even in midsummer, and he didn't appear to be minding. Not minding the cold, anyways. After a bit he took out a clasp knife and started stripping off pieces of the drift log. While he got a heap of them together I divided up the rations in separate bunches, making three other piles apart from the main ones to take back to the launch for the three aboard. Crockett, he was talking soft with Ellen back in the shadows. From what I heard it wasn't so much as if he had to keep talking as usual, but like he was really saying something.

Hattram had a pretty good pile of chips now. He'd laid a flashlight down, and it streamed over the sorry patch of ground and lit up the heap of chips. He found a match and struck it and it flared up like a snake's tongue going, and everybody drawed in around it, with their faces looking shadowy and different than the faces they wore in the sun. Little Eddie says, "Here, quick, blow on her . . ." and leans down close and blows, soft and steady. She catches, and some of the willow wood was dead enough to catch too, and there was whispery crackles amongst the leaves. A little smoke come curling up, and then a finger of blaze run up a little further, and I eased the big piece of drift over so's the end of it would catch. It looked like the jawbone of a huge dead man.

We set back and didn't say much. Fillgan was shivering so hard you could hear his teeth scrape together, and Ellen says, "Here, take this," and hands him her raincape. He grunted something and pulled it around his shoulders and huddled there, sad-faced and big-eyed. There hadn't



been any more plane noises for quite a while. The stars was getting bigger. They was clear as chips of diamonds spread out on a blue-black cloth in the jewelry windows there on Royal. You could just make out the shapes of things by the starlight and the moonlight. The launch was a dark point out there in the V of the cove, and the stand of small trees over to our right was like a bunch of men standing there and wondering would they be welcome if they come any closer. The moonlight wasn't strong; it was just a quarter-moon. The fire was going better, and I shaped it up neater and made a nest for the coffee water. Little Eddie had the pot full and he set it down sloshing. I put coffee in the strainer and set the strainer down in the water and put the lid on.

Fillgan says, kind of brave and bold except it wasn't, "Well, it'll make a fine story for the boys back home."

I supposed it would. I couldn't think about much of anything but me and Ellen. I wasn't even disliking Hattram. He hadn't said much, just needling around in spells, mostly being short and sharp with Crockett. His eyes never seemed to be still, but maybe that was the firelight in them. I didn't look close. He snicked off the flashlight and stuck it in a hippocket. I passed around what rations there was, and we waited for the coffee to perk. I wasn't much hungry, but I ate the part I'd divided my way. Little Eddie took the three rations that was left back to the launch. He was just a dimness fading away behind the firelight. The coffee was done when he got back. We only had four cups and we took turns using them. Most all the rations we'd carried on Hattram's launch had been just enough to give us a bite in the middle of the day; we hadn't ever aimed on an all-night stand of it. The coffee was good and stout, though, and I thought that it and what rations we'd got together would hold us till morning.

Hattram stooped and stirred the fire. It was dying down fast to red coals, and with another willow branch he was trying to get some life back in it. He says, "If nobody's come by morning—"

I says: "Well, I was thinking. I might take your dinghy and try for the docks."

He looked over the fire at me.

"It's a hell of a way in a dinghy," he says. "If you didn't

make it they'd have to start looking for you after they found us."

He dropped the stick in the fire, and it blazed for a short while, making a purring, restless noise. It lighted his face for a few seconds, and his eyes was that queer hard blue.

"There's more chance of me getting in line with another boat, roving around in the dinghy," I says. "More chance anyhow than us just laying up here in a lump. Even if the planes come over in the morning, all they're going to see is what looks like a bunch of picnicking people with a perfectly good launch. But a man in a dinghy out this far—"

"Yeah, maybe so," he says. And again, "Maybe so. Hell, I wish I had something to drink."

"There's the beer," I told him.

"Screw the beer," he says.

Ellen says from the shadows behind him: "I'd like a bottle, Carp. After a while."

"Sure deal," I says.

Me and Hattram went on looking at each other over what was left of the fire. I reckoned the fire would go on glowing a while. It smelled good and like dry land, that wood smoke. His eyes bored right into mine, and I gave it right back. I thought: Go ahead, get mean now, you mean bastard. I hope you do. I'd like for you to see I won't take anything, ever, from you. And I won't let her take it any more either.

Again I had the feeling of being bigger than usual, and stronger.

Finally he grunts and looks away. "Beer," he says, disgusted like. "Goat Island." And he got up and stalked away.

Little Eddie and I set talking while the rest of them got bedded down. Fillgan wrapped himself in the blanket, and Crockett had a poncho and was curled up in it. The canvas they lay under was like a tent side; it had been rigged pretty good, one side to a willow that would hold it staunch enough and the other pegged down with sticks and so forth. The side to the woods was open, but it made a lean-to that would keep them pretty snug in there. There was room for Hattram under it too.

Little Eddie says: "I'll sleep in the cabin on the floor. It's as good a place as any, and the night damp won't get in there."

I says, "My daddy always held them night mists never hurt you, did you get them boiled out of your bones the next day."

"Well," he says, "I'll take the cabin floor anyhow. I wish I had a hook or something to get that line off the screw."

"You think it's fishline?"

He makes a face in the half-dark. "Must be. Hattram had his line out, and I think when you spotted the fire he just naturally let it go all the way. We sure'n hell run over it. It wasn't no line from that Fillgan's launch because I understand they wasn't even fishing."

"Well," I says, "even so, it could be. The line could of been stowed away on Fillgan's launch and got blown up with the rest."

"I don't think so. It's Hattram's own damn' foolishness got us hung up here. That and blind damned bad luck. He knows it was him, too."

"M-m-m," I says. I didn't want to talk about him. I didn't want to think about him. I reckoned I'd sleep on deck, when I slept.

Doone Crockett was already asleep. Fillgan was sleeping too, and snoring a little, his stubbled face sticking out looked silvery in the lean little firelight. The fire was flickering now where I'd punched it up again.

Eddie got up and brushed off his pants. "Well, pray for them Coast Guard."

"I'll keep a watch a while," I says. He nods good night and goes off. It feels then as if I'm alone on the island. Not really alone, but alone the way it is when others are sleeping and you're full awake. Crockett give a little moan in his sleep, and Fillgan just kept up a blubbery rich contented snoring like a supreme child. I could hear some splashing on the other side of the island, and I reckoned it was Hattram.

It was warmer now, having got used to the coolness. What moonlight there was come yellow, not white any more but like it was warm too. The fire was most out when Hattram come back. He stood for a minute looking out to the launch and then he turned on his flashlight and the beam cut a path out to the bow. She was just lying

there, clean-lined and not worth a damn to us at the present.

He says, "That bitch."

I says, "She's a good-enough launch." He swiveled the light around at me a second, then let it hang along his pants leg, still lighted. I guess he'd forgot I was there. "She's a good craft," I says again. "It's just too damned bad we had to go and run over that fishline."

He just stood there a second, then he flicked the light off and hunched down and got in under the canvas. I could hear him wallering and shoving in there a space; I heard Crockett talk in his sleep and Fillgan blurt out like a hog with the colic; then after a spell I guessed they was all settled. I set there with the small moonlight around me, and then I stretched. The sand felt cool and crisp under me, not so scurfy and dried up, but like it was loosening, coming alive in the night. After a space I stood and looked up for a while. It was nice just being there, just being any place. There wasn't the hint of a cloud between stars. In the water they looked as sparkly and far off as they looked in the sky. It didn't seem to me you could reach out and pick them, like some say. Where they feel close is in your mind, not to your fingers.

I walked all the way down to the end of the island on the south. I thought about the way the island had got left there, still sticking up when the rest of the land went under, time the Gulf was made. It felt like there was things it had to remember. I don't know if they was Tristan de Luna things or not. Other people had been there in other times. But there had been a lot of long lonesome times in between; you could feel it. I walked on around to the east shore, where it went along in back of the woods. There was a sharper shelf to the sand there and it went down clean into the big dark bowl of the Gulf, and the sand was whiter under the moon. It was still soft under my feet, but I left hardly any tracks. The woods put shadows down and there was a bunch of mounds, about as high as my knees, going off and getting shallower and merging into the regular flat of the rest of the island. By one of the mounds that was nearest the water, with a pretty good strip of beach between, I set down in the deep black shadow. I leaned against the mound and watched the water.



I hadn't been there long when I see the crabs come. They was fiddler crabs, one claw long and stretching, dancing along the beach and picking up whatever drifted in, eating the insides out of the other kinds of crabs or their own dead selves, whatever they could get. Real little ones, and a passel of them, maybe a hundred, and all flickering and dancing down there. I kept real still. This here mangy little island was probably the top of a mountain, I figured. That made me feel different about it, made it even look different. I noticed how I could see clean as crystal right down into the water itself, light green for quite a ways out before it got to be inky. Then I see a sailfish come in, his eyes first, the color of black stones winking, then his whole long body, and damn! they don't look like that out of the water slung on a hook being weighed. He was a fair-sized one. Folks tell you they never come close to land. Well, this one come close enough so's I could see the size of his bill, big as a Louisville Slugger bat, and then he turned flankwise to me and hung there before he kind of skimmed off without looking like he was moving at all. His sides was like diamonds, only smoother, and his shoulders where they bulged had a color like the violet in the sky before the sun goes, right close to the sun, that bright. I just stayed there holding my breath. I was about to let it go again after he'd vanished, gone off wink, like that, in the dark water and the whole Gulf behind him, and I was fixing to scrooge around and get more comfortable when I see this other thing come. Watching it there at the first, I felt the same as when I'd seen the pelicans. A creepy tremor spun all through me.

What come heaving up out of the water was like something so old-timey it went way past what men imagined lived once on a time, way past any Tristan de Luna. A big black slow shape you couldn't think of seeing the like of. It come dripping, and when it was part way up, not quite all the way out of the water, I see it's a turtle, the monstrous kind you see pictures of once in a spell when they fish one up, but that sure ain't often. The water was shining off his shell, and the shell so high it looked to come up to my belly. He come slow, certain, sure, all the time in the world, with that gray, snaky, dark-shiny neck stuck out, and then looked around and just stood there

dripping. He was an old bull tortoise, looked older than time. You could see where little sea-weedy growths had got caught on him, down by the rim of the shell. He was like nobody could tell you what. I didn't hardly take a breath. I was kind of cold, but hot and prickly too.

See, it had all happened so slow, so slow . . . maybe hours were swimming by, but what's an hour? Something told me that two hundred years or so back, when all them people died in the epidemic, a lot of Spanish and such, and got buried in them tombs in the Church Street Cemetery back in town, the tombs so old some of them are cracked and you can see the bones in a slant of sun ray knifing through on a bright day—when they all died, this turtle here was alive in the sea and on the land. Maybe even then, looking like this. And in my grandad's time and my own daddy's and mine, the same. I got the feeling nothing made any difference on a watch or a clock, but everything was like a ghost come standing in front of me, and still no ghost because there it was, out of the big Gulf. It was saying that no man knows much about time.

While it kept saying that, I felt Ellen slide down next to me. I guess I'd heard her moving soft as moonlight on the sand behind the mound. She didn't say anything, and I didn't look at her, but went on watching the big turtle. He was all you could watch. It was like he held you, every particle of you, and there would be no end to it. But after a while, I don't know when, I put an arm around her, and she was so quiet it was like there was never going to be a need to speak. She was naked, and her flesh, when she turned to me, seemed made of the sand and the light of the moon and the dark of the night itself.

Then we leaned to each other there in the shadow. The whole swell of the Gulf out there in the dark moved. She smelled of salt and sand and herself. We rocked together, warm and slow. The hollow of her back was smooth and cool, but her throat felt warm to my mouth, and so did her light fast breath in my ear. All of time hung around us like it was unrolled and stopped. Oh, sure, the water and land and stars was there, but only because we happened to be there to know them, to feel them there like parts of ourselves flowing out from the center of ourselves. And I thought: There's a music. It's all around us.

We don't hear it much but it's right here. And right here now. And I thought: Whatever music earth and stars and sun turn to, this is the rhythm of it. We breathed and moved in time to it, and the sand under us moved with the same beating pulse. And so did the whole lovely world.

## CHAPTER XV

IT WAS LATE. You could feel the morning coming. The turtle was gone. I don't know when he'd finally slipped off into the water, though I had a dim remembrance of seeing him go. The sky had that edge of morning feeling about it. Everything is quietest then. A wind had come up, ever so shy, dusting through the leaves of the trees over in the stunky wood. I was laying on my back. I could feel her arm and her thigh against mine. The moonlight was faded and thin. The sand didn't reflect much of it. There was a meek grayish light in the air. You could feel the Gulf breathing the way you imagine a sleeping giant breathes. You could feel the lift and fall through the land from underneath.

I felt her thigh tense a little and I turned to her. Her eyes were closed. I says quiet, "Let's swim." We got up, then, not moving fast, not even brushing sand off us, and waded into the water. It was chill at the edge, but where it shelved off and we dropped into the dark deep it was full and warm around us. The strip of sand where it was shallow near the shore looked like a sort of amber belt under the water. We swam straight out from the island, side by side and neither of us making much noise, though the noise we did make sounded loud because everything else was so quiet.

After a while I curled around in the water and she did too, and we come swimming back in. When we got to the ledge of the drop-off I could just touch botton. She'd

been a mite behind me, and I waited there till she come up alongside and then I reached out and pulled her whole length against me. She felt like silk and satin and velvet, only better. I held her hard. Our shadows were moving dim and rippling on the sand under the water. We stood so for a long minute, looking at each other and smiling. Her hair was wet and matted on her shoulders and it smelled like the woods in a rain, deep and thick and quiet. Her eyes was so dark I could see my own face in each of them and the last of the night stars behind me, a darkness like the end of the world. Or maybe the beginning.

Then all in a tick of a second a change come over her. She went stiff and she wasn't smiling any more, and she started to shiver like she had a chill. She let her head drop and would of pushed away only I still held her too hard. She shook her head, short and hopeless-like, and I thought, Ellen, whatever it is, don't say it. Just don't say it! And then I heard something snap up nigh the beach. I let her go and dove down the same time I heard it. It wasn't any water creature come up on land; it didn't sound like that at all. I swum under water with my eyes open for maybe fifty feet, angling off to the east, and when I come up I was so far in that the sand scraped my belly. I stood up and waded to shore, slicking the water off my arms as I went. My jeans was back in the shadow of the mound. Hattram was on the beach shining his flash across the water. He turned it on me even though it was light enough to see me without it, then he snicked it off. "What the hell you doing up so early?"

"Minding my own damned business," I says soft. I come up to him on the sand. He didn't look like he'd slept much. There was a crease under one eye where a twig or a ridge of sand had pressed what time he had slept. His eyes was kind of empty and that hard light blue.

"What you doing up this early?" he says again. I guess he hadn't heard me the first time.

I says: "Just out for the air. Wash some of the land stink off. Up early yourself, ain't you?"

"Yes. But I wouldn't be fool enough to swim out there. These waters are full of sharks."

"Shark ain't going to bother you, you don't fret them."

I went over to the mound. The shadow there was



grayer now. I could see the print of her hips where we'd laid. I picked up my jeans and got into them. I didn't bother to rub out the print. I some way didn't care. I buttoned my jeans while I come walking back to him. I worked on the top button. "Not many sharks around here anyhow," I says. "That stinking little one we caught was just a drifter from a lot farther out. You aim to keep him?"

He just stood there, watching me.

I says, "Well, he'll sure look nice on your wall. You can tell your friends he give you one hell of a fight."

His eyes never wavered. Then I thought maybe the reason they looked so queer was he almost never blinked. He says, "Carp."

"Right here," I says. We wasn't standing but nine inches apart.

"I guess maybe you don't want this job."

"What give you that idea?"

"Well," he says short, keeping it all held back in himself, or trying to, "the cocky way you acted last night about the fire. I don't like my help to be snotty."

I couldn't think any way I'd acted about the fire.

"I'm paying you twenty a day," he says. "I don't mean to be snotted for that kind of money."

I looked at him. What was he but a poor dissatisfied meaching little man? I felt sorry for him, and like I ought to take him by the arm, gentle, and talk to him like I'd of talked to my own brother, quiet, and not getting mad. Same time, he made me laugh inside. I heard a light noise like a ghost of splashing, way below us and close to shore.

I says: "Well, now. I can't fathom any way I've acted to make you think I was being snotty. I appreciated it, first, about the hound. . . . Of course, you hadn't ought to of had that hound anyhow. You hadn't ever ought to have anything you didn't get with your own hands. Some people, why, I suppose they could have anything they didn't earn for themselves, with bare knucks, but you, well, it kind of ruined you."

"Listen, you white-trash bastard," he says, but I went right on. I kept my arms down, loose and waiting.

"You listen," I says. I don't know if he'd seen her out there or not. He might of. It didn't make a piece of difference. In a way I almost hoped he had. "You listen, and

don't say nothing or I'll slam them buck teeth right back down your crying throat." I wasn't talking loud. I wasn't even feeling all the way mad. "You aim to take out the way you feel on women, niggers, and dogs. Maybe you can if you so desire; that ain't naught to do with me. It wasn't bad working for you because I pitied you in spite of your scumminess. Now: I ain't working for you no more, because I ain't a woman, nor yet a servant or a dog. The name's Carp Rambo."

But I could feel the mad climbing then. I could feel it coming up through my veins to my temples. I knowed I'd best get away from him. I didn't want to touch him. He stood there with his little mouth tight. It still wasn't exactly what you could call a mean-looking mouth. Not mean, but it sure wasn't a generous, pleasant mouth neither. His light sandy hair was mussed and a tic was going in his left cheek. I looked at him careful.

He studied down at his feet then and shuffled around some. "Carp, maybe I'm crazy. Maybe I'm not being fair to you."

"I wouldn't know," I says. "There's just some things a man, if he is a man, don't take from another. If you was a man maybe you wouldn't take what I'm saying, or what I'm doing either, from me. There's nothing a body can do about the worms of creation. You can't just squash them all because you'd be spending all your time squashing. That's how I feel about you, Mister Hattram."

He swallowed a couple of times. His eyes was clouded over, but the tic wasn't twitching as hard in his cheek. I don't reckon anybody, not his father Senator Buck or anybody, had ever spoke to him like that. I needed something awful to speak to him that way though.

He says: "All right, I'm letting this go. You can still work for me if you want to. I admire a man speaks his mind. Aren't many men left who do."

"There's a couple," I says.

He says, "You're still with me, then."

I says, "There ain't much choice till we get off this place."

"I mean, after," he says. "The fact is, I'd as soon we were friends."

I had to take a little time over that. Then I says: "Well, I'm your wife's friend more'n I could ever be yours. But

if you feel like that and you're saying sorry, I ain't no hot-headed son of a bitch neither."

He made a half-motion with the flashlight he was still holding, the nickel of it shiny-dull there in the early light, and then he shoved it in a side pocket and stuck out his hand.

"Shake on it?"

"No, I reckon not," I says. My mad was still up. I still didn't want to touch him, in peace or in anger. I'd told him what I'd thought and he'd, kind of, apologized for what he'd said, but that don't always kill a mad once it gets up. It didn't wipe out the wrong he'd done to Ellen or take away the times she'd wondered how she'd got into this and worried about what she was and who she was and why she was. I could feel all that, boiling and churning, and I says, "I don't think so, Mister Hattram. I got a good many reasons for it."

"Well," he says, "I admire courage."

"I don't give a damn if you do or don't," I says. "If I got your permission and nothing's come by sunup I'm taking the dinghy out and seeing what I can do." I thought, when I said it, Maybe I'll get drowned or baked to a crisp out there on the water, and then he won't have to feel this tore-up way. It was like he was one of them crabs, in a shell most of his mortal life, and now he was seeing maybe a glimmer of what it was like outside the shell. Just a glimmer. But it shook the roots of his self real bad and he didn't like it. Only he didn't like the way the land lay inside the shell any more neither.

There's some I reckon always stay in their shell; they figure anything outside it is beyond them and lawless and so they have to get rid of it some way, and that's what they work on, and meanwhile they stay in the shell and go blind. I still felt pitying and still a little mad: mad with myself, too, for talking to him as I had, for bothering to talk at all. The night was going and the morning was well on its way, and I just wanted for Ellen and me to be together again in it.

"Hell yes, Carp," he says. "Take the dinghy." He looked at me with his head still kind of down. The poor bastard. And then he adds soft, "You can take anything I got."

I didn't know if he meant Ellen. I kind of think he did. It was the first thing I'd ever heard him say that sounded

like it come from something real in him. I says, "No man can take anything another man's really got."

The shadows of the mounds was laying out flatter and fainter on the sand. It was just a dirty gray strip of beach now, and there might never of been no turtle and no people but the kind who are like tourists, that look without seeing and then pass on.

I didn't know was he hating me or trying to like me as a friend. I don't reckon he knew either. I reckon really it was both. I knowed what it would be later when we all got back. He just wasn't cut out to be a friend to anybody. There's a power of understanding under a man's skin that he gives the go-by to all his life because it's easier to sail right on without seeking it, without staying still and quiet as a stone or a tree till it comes up, and finding it.

I says, "I'll take the dinghy, then," and turned and went back on up the beach.

On the other side of the island, out on the deck of the launch, I could see Ellen laying rolled up on a length of tarp. The first real touch of light was in the east, pinking it. You could tell it was going to be another hot one. I laid down on the sand that was a little cold under me, then not cold, and before I could even start to think of Ellen or Hattram or the night just past or the coming day, I was dead asleep.

I woke up thirsty. The sun was climbing the sky but nobody else was stirring. I tried to mind what had been the dream jarred me awake. It was going in puffs of powder like drifts of gun smoke, floating away over hazy fields in my head. I could just catch the tail end of one of them drifts: was something to do with Ellen, and Suzy Ellen, and a sad dark tight feeling in me. . . . I shook my head and started back toward the woods where I'd set the drinking water in the creek.

Hattram and Fillgan was asleep under the canvas there. Hattram was sleeping light, making no noise. Fillgan looked drawnout and like he'd had bad dreams too. I wonder what stockbrokers dream about? Numbers, I reckon, alive and moving around. I went quiet past the canvas. I figured Crockett must of wiggled his way back farther in. But he wasn't there. I come up on past the first



of the clump of willows and brushed away the mass of wilted leaf hanging from a cabbage palm that didn't look like it would ever put out no real-sized leaves, and then I see him. He was standing there alongside the creek with his shirt off and pouring water from one of the big bottles down over his chest and arms, scrubbing himself with one hand, a far off look on his face like the most thoughtful absent-minded person you ever saw, kind of gentle with his face lifted to the early light. He looked up and didn't turn a hair when I come down the shallow bank.

"Good morning, Carp. The lark is at Heaven's gate. And Phoebus 'gins arise."

He held out the water bottle. "Have some, my friend. Nothing can compare to fresh water. It removes the grime where the salt can't reach."

I come the rest of the way down the bank and took the bottle away from him. I took it quiet like you'd take shears from a baby. It was most gone. There was just a slosh in the bottom.

"That's right nice. That's drinking water."

A look come over his face like I'd slapped him, and he made a motion with his hand. "I didn't know . . . yes, of course I knew. But I assure you, I didn't think . . . the thought never touched me." He looked up at me again, then his eyes went back to the creek. It was good water there, brackish, sure, but good enough for any bath. "I'm dreadfully sorry," he said soft.

"Well, listen," I says, holding up the bottle. "I ain't going to say another word about it, but next time, remember. There just might come a time when—" I heard a crackle in the trees behind me. I looked around. Hattram was coming down.

Doone was staring down at the bed of the creek again, his lips moving quiet: "If I weren't almost totally unfitted for this world, I should certainly have a modicum of thoughtfulness for others. I seem fitted for nothing but a dream, and dreams—" He stared at me. "I think dreams are no good, Carp. They cannot be adapted."

"They're all right. They're fine. But—"

Wasn't time to say more. Hattram come right past me and takes a look at the bottle. I guess he got up when I went past the canvas up there, and heard Crockett. He

says, gritty-like: "You silly old son of a bitch. You has-been. Come here."

Doone looks up with his eyes steady and sad. "All right, Mr. Hattram."

"Hurry up," Clint says.

I says, "Take it easy."

Hattram didn't even look my way.

Doone Crockett come slow up the bank, sort of dignified and easy like he was going for a walk some place and had to get there in time, but didn't really want to. But coming, all the same. He picked up his shirt and rubbed around his ears with it and rubbed the fringe of gray hair that sticks up soft as a baby chipmunk's fur around his ears, then kept on climbing. I didn't know what Hattram was going to do till he done it. He leans forward and the left comes out in a quick feint, and at the same time I'm moving. Hattram follows up the feint, before I can reach him, with a cracking hard right; you can hear it land on Doone's chin, and Doone he just goes all the way back, landing in the soft brush around the bank and laying there. Hattram is most on top of him, and I can see his face from the side and it's white, his lips twisted back, his eyes looking that crazy light blue, like a cat's gone mad, and he's hitting Doone anywhere he can, using the backs of his hands and then the heels, and Doone not making a sound. I got a hand on Hattram's shoulder and hauled back and he come spinning. Hattram jerks my hand off, then says, "The bastard was using the drinking water."

I drew in a deep breath. I felt glad, the way you do when an explosion you've been set and waiting for a good long while finally goes off. I says, "All right, Hattram; try taking it out on me."

He stayed there a second, kind of hunkering low and ready, and I waited. Then he straightens up more and kicks sideways up the bank. Doone's starting to get up, patient and slow, shaking his head, stooping over to pick up his shirt. Mister Fillgan come stomping down through the brush looking lost and wild and bewildered. "What's going on here?"

Hattram, he was breathing hard. Then he grinned a little. But his eyes stayed the same.

"Maybe I will at that, Carp. Oh, excuse me. *Mister Rambo.*"

"Come ahead," I says.

"Oh, no. Not right now. Not like this."

Behind Fillgan, up higher, the trees swayed again. It was Ellen. Damn it, but she walked nice. She come through the trees the way a deer goes through, slick and just looking, not haughty, but away and apart from all men. Her hair had been brushed down and fluffed out and it was a burning blackness with little red stabs of light from the morning sun. I looked up at her and I felt like we were the only two on the island that was growed up.

She says: "There's a Coast Guard cutter coming in. I ran up one of the flags; James Dee told me which one was the distress signal. Eddie took the dinghy to go out and meet them." She was calm as a water lily. She was wearing a blue dress I reckoned she'd got from her trunk in the launch cabin. Her eyes was dark, and whatever she was thinking, it never showed.

Fillgan says, "Thank the Lord, we're saved."

"Yes," she says. "Not that we were ever lost."

She looks down at her husband. "Did you kick him?" she asks, the way you'd say, "Did you sleep good?"

Hattram never answered, never even looked her way.

Doone Crockett was coming on up the bank again. He looked a little shook up, but not so bad. He climbed straight, quiet.

Hattram turned around and went up through the trees a little distance.

"He usually kicks them," she said. "When they're young enough, or old enough."

Doone Crockett stopped and then give a little bow to her and says: "Excuse me, Mrs. Hattram. I'm sorry to have caused this trouble."

She took his hand and helped him up the bank. "You didn't."

"Yes, Mrs. Hattram. It was my fault."

"Nothing was your fault," I said. "Nothing at all. You just go set down and take it easy till that Coast Guard gets here."

"Yes. Thank you." He went on, walking up through the trees, and Ellen and me watched him go. When the limp

old palm leaf came flapping down again I went to her and touched her hands a second. She smiled at me. We didn't do or say nothing more. It was like touching the middle of something that the rest of the world revolved around. The others was snapping through the woods and on up the beach. We just touched hands. That was enough. It felt it would be enough for a long while.





FALL



## CHAPTER XVI

SUZY ELLEN WAS laying alongside me in bed, and I'd just woke up and I was thinking about the summer that had gone by and the things that had happened, on the island and off the island. It was late September. A vine with leaves shaped like broad wings, or the ears of a small green beast, climbed up by the screen of our bedroom window. You could feel the light air of the early morning traveling around and saying hello. There was a lift in the air, the kind that gets itself made over again every single morning. I laid there breathing deep but quiet. Suzy Ellen's back was to me. She was stretched out careless, sleeping without any noise. The silveriness of her hair was spread out over the pillow and across my shoulder. It was like a waterfall that's been stopped so you can see the curve of the water and the way it goes shiny and silvery and still. I was thinking how we'd got off the island—nothing exciting about it—in the Coast Guard cutter, and then come back through the inlet and on into town. It was coming back to another world, even if it was really the same old crust of earth and puddles of water. Except a man could stay in one world all his life and never know a thing about the other. The shadow of the vine wasn't a real shadow; it was rosy with the sun through it. I could hear Bo out in the hall, digging for a late summer flea.

I laid there thinking about Hattram, how I didn't truly hate him, and about Ellen, how she and Doone Crockett had gone to the city hospital with James Dee while Hattram went on home. And how I'd come driving back down the noonday streets, back into another world. I had the Chevvie going pretty good now. I'd fixed her so the noise of her valves and tappets was less of a shock, and her points was shiny clean. I'd drove her back from where I'd parked her at the docks, coming into all that swash of light that lays down on Government and on the rest of the streets nigh the courthouse and the jail and the city hall, and it was like everybody was taken up, the



way ants is, with what's happening that very minute—like ants carrying bits of straw in their pincers and scurrying to and fro in the great light. And I thought of that island back there, alone and cut off from the rest of the world. I felt part of me was still out there on that island. I felt that way even when I stopped by the Magnolia Bar to tell Old Man Durbin I was back and ready to work again, a little earlier'n he'd been expecting me.

He was glad enough to see me back, it wasn't that; come to that, I was glad enough to see him. It was nothing I could poke down hard the way you can stab a leaf to the ground with your finger and examine it. Funny, I'd never thought I'd ever be the least bit lonesome for that foolish scrubby little island, but I guess that was partly it. And ever since that first day back, off and on, I'd get to feeling the same.

I laid there with the sun across my legs in little bars and cross-hatches from the screen and the blue day outside silent and full, and Suzy Ellen stirring a little now and curved around with her arm thrown over me, cool and yet warm with night sleep.

I reckoned Mister Fillgan had built it all into a high and mighty adventure. He would tell it so. Fillgan, and that Moore, and the other man, Snively, they'd probably all told about it back at the places they went to in Chicago. It had been in the newspaper, no pictures but a neat little write-up as bald and hard-bit as a nannygoat's tooth: Daring Rescue by Coast Guard Cutter—Launch Sinks, Prominent Citizens Castaways on Island—and so forth. It didn't say, though, how Hattram had run out to the launch and made Eddie start her up at the last minute and then stood pumping the throttle, hollering he could get her started and we was just a bunch of chicken. You could smell the bearings. I reckon he didn't do that engine any good. And it didn't say how Eddie had worked his throat when he see that, and says to me out of a mouth corner: "I can stand to see a bastard whip a horse or dog, but damn, a engine can't kick or bite back. Well, hell, it's his." Or how in the cutter on the way back Ellen changed James Dee's dressing, and how Hattram looked at her when she did. He bent over and said something to her, I don't know what, and it was just as good I didn't hear, I guess, judging from the way her face whitened. But she

went right on with the bandaging, never as much as looking up.

No; and it didn't say how I felt about any part of it. It was just a story in the paper. I reckon they do the best they can with the facts on hand, them fellows; but they're like water bugs on the skin of a pond, and beneath is where the fish lay with their shapes showing dim and their fins moving back and forth in the light that goes down cool and means more than the eye can see or the hand can touch. I laid there, thinking these things and watching the vine outside the window.

God, it was a big round day!

After breakfast I whistles up Bo for a walk, and Suzy Ellen decides she'll come too, so the three of us sets out. The autumns around there are enormous. Some days the sun is warm as melted gold but not scorchy a bit, and when clouds float across it it goes dim and has a sad mellow slant to it. The Spanish moss in the oaks has a soothing, webby, look, soft and light, but tough, too, like it meant to stay put in any kind of wind at all. High up in the trees the leaves was a light easy green, clustered like so many giant fists being shaken at the big blue sky. The road under our feet was friendly to step on and curled away through the trees and over the hills like an adventure. Loping along free, I thought how one skimpy little road, one little patch of country, can take on bigness, a day like this. Suzy Ellen's dress went wish-a-wish. Bo, up ahead, padded in that zigzaggy way of his, tail up neat and eyes slitted wicked for whatever nonsense he could scare up along the roadside.

After a spell we come to one of those old-time burying places, not a cemetery but a sure enough old-fashioned graveyard, like you're apt to see in the backwoods part of any side-road country. It was growed over by vines and weeds, and the gates had sagged in and the grass was waist high. But off to one side was a little path, kind of wore down enough to pick your way on. We turned off onto this path and walked on into the graveyard. It come all over quiet—not just because we was off the road and away from traffic; wasn't hardly any cars out anyway—so quiet you felt maybe it was all the quietness of all the years since the first one got buried here, all piled up in layers, like lumber, only you could walk through it, on

this one piece of ground. The tombstones, them that was still standing, was thinned by the rain and the wind and I reckon the beat of time itself. They looked like outsize soda crackers, chewed and petrified. The writing on them was all wore down, and the clasped hands and weeping willows and angels on them was all dim, and religious, and forgot, like. But you could kind of feel it didn't matter one bit, least of all to them that laid beneath the stones. Everything had mellowed down and mixed together, the way fallen apples in a deserted orchard are left to mulch into the earth, and nobody caring.

Suzy Ellen walked ahead of me, springy and alive, with her white-blond hair young and free down her back. The light through the boughs of the high-hanging old trees went flick and flick over us as we walked. She stops by a stone and bends down to read it. It says, "Sulan Peters, son of Abigail Peters, beloved husband of Marietta Margate Peters, 1807-1831." I wondered some about Sulan Peters, who died around my age or so, but not much. I set down on a hummock that was topped by a bigger monument and just watched Suzy Ellen and smelled the mint in the grass and listened to Bo projecting not far off. I'd have to take him cooning for real, soon.

By and by Suzy Ellen let off reading the tombstones and come and set by me. I thought, My she's pretty. A girl and a woman all wrapped up in one, and the best of each showing through clear as a clean pane of glass. Some bees hummed in a set of clover in the shadows past the tallest grass, and we leaned back, calm and peaceful.

"Carp," she says, looking straight ahead, "you ever had any other woman since you married me?"

I mean, just like that, right crack out of the box.

And you wouldn't think she'd been studying Boo.

I says, "Now what kind of a fool question is that?" Only it didn't sound right in my own ears, and I felt a deal warmer than I had up to then.

"It's just a question," she says. "Sometimes you look kind of funny and far-off, and then I think it. Now I'm asking, is all."

She didn't sound mad or anything like that. Just careful-like, and still looking dead ahead.

Looking at it her way, I felt more of that hotness com-

ing up in my face. But then I thought how nobody can do more than look at a thing his own particular way, and it come clear what I had to say, and I felt the hotness going away.

I says, and I'm careful and not mad either, only firm and meaning it: "Listen, Suzy Ellen. Maybe I have had a woman and maybe I haven't. But if I haven't I wouldn't never say so, and if I had twenty dozen I wouldn't say so neither. Not as long as I know how I feel about you, I wouldn't. Any time that changes, you'll be told about it. Meanwhile, I don't see it matters one tiny atom, and talking or thinking about such things and blowing them up big is a wrong and a lowering kind of thing to do. I ain't any different from what I was when you married me, and if you was satisfied with me then, you got no call to be dissatisfied now. If all you got to fret about is a funny look on my face, you're a happy woman. And the way I feel toward you hasn't changed any either, except maybe it's gone deeper down and got spread out further."

She stays quiet a minute, then she gives a kind of sigh. "That's a man's answer, Carp. Always the same."

"What would you rather be married to," I says, "a Teddy bear?"

"It ain't that," she says, "only a woman couldn't never say a piece like that, because she's made different. But being a woman, she has to make it do, I guess. Even like this morning, when you was awake and you thought I was asleep. I wasn't, though. And when I see you look the way you did, it hurt me a little."

She spoke it simple and quiet.

"But one thing," she says.

"What?"

"Well, a woman likes to know if she's—if she's the best."

I says, "You ain't heard me complaining none, have you?" and then I reaches for her, but she knocks my hand away and bounds up. Suddenly she's all hellfire again, her hands on her hips and her feet apart, facing me. Them blue eyes flash and she lets rip and I know everything's all right—really all right. "You just best never let me catch you," she blazes. "I catch you whoring around, I'll lay into you and pound knots on your spine with a load of fatwood so's you won't get up for a year of Sundays. Else I'll put ground glass in your chicory and dance



on your grave in the fanciest widow's weeds money can buy."

"No," I says, "you wouldn't do none of them things. You're just working your jaw. Now. You got any more on your mind needs airing, say it out, only say it civil."

"I'll civil you," she says, but there's that look in her eye I know like I know my own name and I reach for her again, but she jumps away and starts running.

She runs fast, but I run faster.

Bo, he kept polite and away from us, or maybe he was just more interested in a grasshopper or a woodmouse track.

The next day was the same kind of glittering day, making much with every corner of it. I had a job of work waiting for me down on Government, where I'd promised to drop around some time even before I'd got the Magnolia Bar job, and this was the day for it. It was at the Montagues', one of them big old places sits back in the residential part of Government a block or so this side the Abba Temple, a house built of gray stone with big pillars that looked like women standing up tall and cool. There was lots of vines and hedges full of dark green and wide strips of lush monkey grass lining the long shadowed walk. Miz Montague, she rented out part of the house to tourists, but she didn't like to. She was a little gray woman shaped comfortable as a small pincushion with sides that just overflowed her corset. Usually she wore some old bonnet strapped on to keep off the sun, and a pair of gloves with most of the fingers cut out, and she was almost always carrying tools to prink and poke and prod at the earth with. It was only September and there were still more sizzlers to come, but by her lights it was time to start banking the beds and burlapping the azaleas. She done it every year, the same date. It was her way. I'd helped her out maybe four years in a row. It didn't pay a sight but it was extra, and I liked her and the work. Does a man good to bend and dibble in the earth, like making things grow in the ground some way makes him grow inside.

I says goodbye to Suzy Ellen: she had a gay cloth tied around her head and was rolling up that damned old carpet again for another go at it, kneeling down there,

her nose looking scornful of anything as bad as common dirt, and Bo looks up at me with his nostrils spread like he's saying, Please? I says, "I'll be home for a quick supper and maybe some pie and it would be a sight pleasing to a working man if it was sweet potato pie."

"Huh," she says. "Maybe you'd like some possum to go with it. Maybe I could invite the neighbors and have a barbecue. You just be glad for what you get, and give thanks it's fair eating and don't gristle down your throat." She turns away from me though, so I won't see her grin; and I grin too and think, I'll get that pie, I bet you, and went out and slammed the screen.

Bo, he come a-ticking after me to the door, his muscles shiny and bunched there against the screen that he could've opened with one flirt of his head, and I says: "I'll take you coon running for real, shortly now. Bide your time and help her beat them carpets."

I went down the steps and got in the Chevvie. I kept her poked up alongside the house close as possible on the west side because most of our night damps come from the east. They seep around and get into the plugs and make pools, regular little lakes, in the block, and then you got hell's own time starting. Today she had a good spark and she started easy, and I tooled off down the road. I stopped at the corner station to tell Gus Helflick where I was going in case anybody wanted to know. He helps me line up jobs and takes calls through his phone. I'd give his number to Ellen a time back, but she'd never called. I told him where I was headed, and then waved and went on down St. Stephens and at Anne Street cut across to Government. I dragged along for a spell behind a truck that was carrying a tree, a big live oak they'd dug up nigh one of the supermarkets to make more parking and sidewalk room. The roots stuck out past the truck's bed and jiggeted in the air like they was alive and full of high humor. It made me sorry every time they dug up one of them things that had been there giving shade since before the diggers and the choppers got borned. But with the sun spilling down through the boughs of that monster in the truck bed and with the niggers setting around her, one of them singing hi-hi-hi to himself, loud over the truck's engine noise, you couldn't help but be happy. I went around them finally and chattered along down

Government. It's such a wide, good street. I like it even when it's full up with traffic and you have to stop every nine, ten yards on Saturday mornings for the lights that ain't staggered right no matter how slow or quick you throttle. I started singing to myself, "Old Cow died in the forks of the Branch"—it's a song that goes good when you feel like that—and then "Sweet Betsy from Pike," that's mournfuller, but not too mournful either.

I got to Miz Montague's and parked up the drive under a portico that swoops out from the side. I reckon there must be forty rooms, anyway, in that house, and they all looked summered rooms, wrapped over with the vines at the window and the leaves laying along the side of the house so thick and full of birds. Cardinals hustled across the strip in back, great big dandies, smart and sassy, and jays nattered in the boughs out back to make you think they was having a meeting of the clans. Miz Montague, she'd been setting in a rocker up on the long front porch, palmleaf fan in one hand, earth-stabbing fork in the other. She laid down the fan and come out when she saw it was me. Her face was wide and full and jowly, a kind face with a little whisker downing it at the sides and on the upper lip. "Carp, I know it's hot, but I sure am glad you showed up today. I'm just full of a feeling it's going to frost early this year."

"Yes, ma'am," I says. "It could, all right. If you'll show me where you want me to start—"

"Well, like always, I guess. Right down the front and work up the north hedge and then back in that other strip that bows down the middle. I declare, that Miz Evans at the garden club like to die when I told her, meeting yesterday, I was making ready to cover my plants, but a stitch in time . . ." She went on yammering but I always like to hear her yammer. When she'd gone away I went and got the tools and things from the shed that's part of the old slave quarters around in back. It smells musty, like potato peelings long soured in the ground, and fertilizer, too, and something dark and older than both of those—but a friendly and known thing even so. Then I went around in front and kneeled down and started in. It was still hot enough, for sure, but there was some cool around the edges of the day, waiting to come in. You could feel it. The sun through the oaks along the

boulevard had a lot of red in it, not that pure white that makes a green web when it touches the walks in the middle of summer days. I inched along, poking the earth up and around and packing it down solid, then covering it with burlap and wrapping it around so, with the edges laid over to keep it firm and so it won't get to running when the rains come. I thought of the maybe hundreds of years, all that time divided in minutes, that people I never saw had done just this, to this very piece of garden ground, and the sun swum red around me. I worked on down the bushes, slow but not loafing any. The burlap felt moist-tough to my fingers as I poked it into the earth.

I could feel the whole town alive around me. I see an old Reo twin-six flash by, a couple of teen-age kids driving it, and it roaring like a happy bastard. But most of the traffic just run along lazy and slow. Sometimes a policeman on his motorcycle idled along looking like he'd been flung neat from somebody else's planet, with his goggles and shiny belt and breeches and all. A couple of hokey-pokey men come by, riding their three-wheeled bicycles with a boxful of ice cream and snowballs, the snowballs them shavings of ice that they pour the different kinds of syrup over, whatever kind you want, for a dime. I was getting thirsty and I reckoned the next one that passed I would hail over. None come by for a spell, though, or else I forgot to look, being all wrapped up and drifting along with what I was doing. The moistness of the ground got through my pants and cooled around my knees, and I wrapped and poked and patted, enjoying it, liking the feel of the earth through my fingers and under my nails. The sun melted away behind a cloud, and the whole mass of greens, the vines and the bushes and the hedges and the monkey grass and the soft zoysia grass, was changed with its going, darkening down in some places and in others not darkening but paling. But when the sun skimmed out again the colors, gradual, turned back to what they'd been before, except you liked them even better for the fact they'd been different that few minutes.

I worked on down, and the sun went under again, slipping between two big flannelly clouds that was massing together. When it rains here in September it comes sudden, and now all at once it come clipping down through



the highest branches. You could hear it rustle before it hit you, and it felt cold on the neck when it did, and hollow and like it had been true ice, back where it started from. I scrooged up my shoulders and turned up my shirt collar and went right on working; wasn't a strong rain, and I ain't sugar.

Then it went away just as sudden and the sun was flowing down this side of the street again, and dogs barking and some kids chasing with a scooter down the block. But right there on the other side, like a curtain, it was still raining. It does that sometimes, shifts in spells so you can see it, just like a curtain of glass beads.

I shook out what rain had got on me, and straightened up and went down the walk where I see, not a hokey-pokey man, but a regular ice-cream cart with a little motor-scooter vehicle attached to it. The man looked a lot more uppity and cleaner and cut along a lot more brisk and businesslike than them hokey-pokey niggers with their tatters and their loose-jointed way of moving. And he didn't holler "Hokey-poke!" like they did, high and globed in the roof of the mouth: he tin-dinkled a little bell. Still, I reckon he sold good cream. I wondered, going down the walk toward him, wiping the mulch off my hands down the sides of my pants, if it was the gloom that comes sudden with a rain shower like that, and then the sun right after, and then maybe more gloom, and then sun again in a great warm slab—I wondered if it was that light and dark pattern that plays on a person like he was a living dulcimer. And if that was why the people of our town are more weather-looking people than most, always keeping sharp track of it, not only in hurricane season, but year round. Or was it maybe just me that was so everlastingly taking note of every twinge of sun or breeze or rain, and if so, why? I guess because I'm the sort that lives in a right-here, right-now kind of way, and the one thing that's always with you here and now is the weather, from day to day and minute to minute. Anyway, the rain had swept on past, like a huge water cart rolling by, slicking the lawns and the leaves of the trees and turning the streets and walks dark. Another few minutes of sun, though, and everything would be bright and dry again.

A station wagon come in close to the curb and stopped. The second time I look I see it's Ellen. She's alone. Without even glancing at him or thinking about it I motion the ice-cream salesman on, and he chugged off, tinkling his bell high and clear and brisk. Ellen leaned across the seat and opened the door on my side. She says, "Noon, lunchtime." There she was, holding the door open, her hair bound around her head in braids—it looked good that way—and smiling. "I called the man at the gas station. He told me I'd find you here. Come have lunch with me and drive around a little, Carp. I want to talk."

"Sure," I says. "Sure, Ellen. I'll just go tell Miz Montague I'll be back." She was wearing a white dress; she looked fresh and fine.

I went back up the walk to tell Miz Montague, moving kind of slow because I was considering something. Seeing Ellen again, sudden as the rain and the sun following the rain, it was another kind of light and dark inside me. I was glad through to see her, but not like the other times. I'd never thought it out to myself in words strung together, but the fact is I guess I'd made a choice, or anyway moved along in one direction like a bird when the seasons change, maybe not figuring the whys of it, but just moving sure in the one direction, the way it was meant to go. It wasn't that I felt any different about her; I didn't. She was still a fine woman to my way of thinking, one to admire and love and like. Only, I knew this would be our last time alone together. I knew it in my veins, the way you do know things you can't see or touch or reason out with your head, it being too full of the everyday tick-tock of living and getting along. Maybe Ellen knowed it too, and that was why she wanted to talk. I hoped so. One thing I never wanted was to have to hurt her any. But something in her was built to last, and nobody could really do her harm, not if she didn't give in or give up. And that danger was over and done with, I believed. It was like the fresh white dress and the neat braids of hair around her head, they was kind of outward signs of the good clean strong-loving thing that made her Ellen.

I told Miz Montague I'd be back in a while, then I went and got in beside Ellen. She started up and we

moved off down Government. We didn't neither of us saying anything for a spell. It was all beneath.

It was like we was both listening to what we didn't say. Under there where all the importances are.

## CHAPTER XVII

SHE TURNED AT the next corner and we wheeled away from town out along Dauphin. We moved on past the older houses set back from the smooth street, looking so peaceful and lived in. The sky was lit up clear of cloud now, and you could see there wouldn't be any more rain for an hour or so anyway. The color of the sun, that red, comes only in the real fall time. Nothing changes much at first, but everything leans away from the earth and moves skyward; you can feel it in your bones, rustling, moving. It isn't a thing you can watch or feel happen all at once and fully, like a whole sudden cold difference. It's a creeping, sad thing, the fall, an ancient-seeming thing like the shadow of one of them Indian chiefs of a long time ago, Tuscaloosa maybe, falling across you, coming between you and everything warm and known.

We went circling left and by and by come to a school that's out there, the red brick of it weathered rough and comfortable. I guess it had stood there long enough to have got to know the air and the light.

She says: "You're very quiet. What are you thinking about?"

"I don't reckon I know," I says. "Food, maybe. Could I get you some lunch?" I wondered what we was stopping at the school for. She was parking. I looked at her fingers resting light and still on the steering wheel.

She says: "I'm teaching here as a substitute for the time being. It gives me something to do with myself, something useful."

I nodded. "Know how you feel," I said.

"Do you? Yes, of course you do. Come on in, Carp. I'd like you to have lunch with me here. Then I'll take you back. I have just half an hour."

She says it smiling like it was funny just to have that much time; but not laughing funny.

She wasn't doing it the way these charity ladies sometimes operate, full of sacrifice and pious about it. I reckon it done her good to be teaching, and I reckon she was doing them kids she taught some good too. We went in together.

The sight of them little kids milling around in the halls, the smell like pencil shavings and eraser dust and the red-colored heaps of compound they used to clean the corridors with, it sent me back years in a couple of seconds. It had smelled like that when I was in school, and I had kind of liked it. You can't tell what's waiting for you out in the world when you're in school, but it might be anything and it's all exciting. Then you go out and it's different than you expected, but not disappointing.

Stepping into the sunny lunchroom and getting led around by her a little and introduced to one or two teachers, I minded a teacher I had name of Miss Linton who was a tall quiet woman with a good face, honest eyes that could look hard at you. She wore a black dress. I don't know why I should remember her, save that I liked her face. I minded how I'd felt setting in her class once, reading a fool poem we had in one of them books they'd give us. The poem said, "Up the river and o'er the lea, that's the way for Billy and me." It was all about fishing and crossing fields and such. It felt just right at the time. I had to read it out loud and I recall the long look Miss Linton give me. I don't guess I spoke it any too good.

There were little kids in there, too, and they kind of glanced at me owl-eyed. I guess they wasn't used to having anybody big as me eat with them. Other little kids had giggling fits with snuffles and sneezes chocked in amongst it all, the way they do, but I didn't mind. Most made me laugh, too.

It was pretty good fare. Not much of it, but enough. The light come streaming in the back of windows behind us and lit up the little things the kids had scissored out and pasted up along the molding of the blackboard, cut-outs of flowers and squirrels and like that. There was



notices in neat writing on the bulletin boards of things to tell their mothers about meetings at the school, and to blow their noses regular, and such. The smell of crayons and warm food filled the room.

I told the teachers I'd met I was proud to of met them, and we went out again and got in the wagon. She headed back a different way, circling deeper into the country, kind of idling along for a spell, taking one of them dirt roads that mosey around and don't go much of anywhere. The banks alongside the roads was covered over with green and they had that deep low-drooping look they get when they've been sunned on all summer long and now it's coming to the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. The trees against the sky was still warm-looking and yet thinner and drawn apart now, not thick and clustered and inky black the way they'd looked for what seemed a mighty long time against the flaring blue. You could hear frogs, them little bitty green ones no bigger than your thumbnail, out in the marshes away from the road. They made a noise that was high and loud and shooting as a little blasty horn; then you'd of slid past them and there'd be quiet again. And a plume of dust rolled along behind us.

We turned off on a kind of avenue that curled around beside a big old brick place, a building lots older than the school. It was made of light brick that looked kind of scarified and lonesome-sudden by itself out in the middle of all those acres, even with the pretty, well tended lawns around it. It was the poorhouse. I remembered coming by there when I was a kid, when we'd used to ramble all over on Saturdays, just belling it like young hounds from one end of creation to the other, cross-countryside for all we was worth. We'd used to look at the old folks setting up on the porch, all looking so clean and so damned poor, and even for kids it was a lonesome-seeming sight that we didn't say much about. I don't reckon they was all sad. Some of them looked mighty cheery and they'd wave and call to us, but still and all there was that feeling of lonesomeness and like they was different and cut off.

There was an old duffer now about fifty yards from us, raking up under one of the oaks that shadowed almost the whole center of the lawn, raking slow, his elbows looking scranneled and parched in the light, the

leaves gentle and soft around his feet. He looked up slow when we stopped and then went on raking, thinking his thoughts, going his way.

She said, "Well, Carp?" soft and easy.

I could of reached out to her right then and held her, and she'd of let me, but what I'd thought about when she'd pulled up in front of Miz Montague's, that was how I truly felt, under the wanting to touch and kiss her. Once you think a certain way like I'd done, you don't open the door again and go back. That would be just like trying to roll back a season, and you know you can't do that. I reckon you might try, but you'd be bound to get confounded and lost and end up feeling mad and cheated.

So I just said: "Well, Ellen. You said you wanted to talk. I reckon I do too. I'm glad you come by today."

"So am I. It's nice, seeing you again, Carp. Very nice. You know, with people like us, things don't stand still. Nothing stays quite the same. But it is nice to see you, Carp."

Hearing her say that was like a weight lifting off me. Hell, I should of known we'd be thinking the same kind of way. We always had. "You don't have to say nothing," I said. "I know how you feel. And it ain't as sad as it would have been, one time, even if it is a mite sad. But this sad minute now will roll right away and then, there's all the rest of our lives ahead. Ellen," I said, "there's something I'd like to tell you out loud. I only wish I was smart enough to say it right, so's you'd see just exactly what I mean, and have it to remember about me."

"You don't have to say anything either, Carp."

"Maybe I better. It's just that having that, what we had, was good. Even if I guess it's supposed to be 'bad. And now I reckon it's over. But you know it ain't liking you any less, and it ain't wanting any less to take and make love to you."

"Yes," she says, her eyes quiet and dark, not that old hot burning; just a long dark steadiness, gazing down at the dashboard. "I know. And now you've said it, and it's over. From now on each of us will go on living our separate lives."

"They're not too uncommonly apart, Ellen, even going in different ways," I says.

She lifted her head to me. "No, they're not too uncom-

monly apart. They never will be, Carp. I'm so very glad you showed me that."

"I don't need no credit. It was fine being together," I said.

I didn't feel deep tearing sad at all. It was just what had to be, knowing it, calm. I sure liked her a lot. I reckon I liked her as much as anybody I ever met, more'n I liked myself—a good bait more. She thought better than most people can, too. Women or men.

"One thing. I'd like you to come out to the Country Club, the second week in October," she said. "It's my turn to plan the party. We're having a band up from New Orleans, but I wanted something more than that. Or perhaps I should say I want to have something more than this. To remember about you, just as you said."

"You want me to sing?"

"Yes. Please say you'll do it for me. And don't get proud about taking pay for it either. It will be worth more to them than you'll be paid, whatever that is. But what it will mean to me is beyond any payment. Say yes."

"Well, I don't know I can compete with a band. But I'll be there."

She smiled and put her hand on mine, light and cool.

I scrooched around a little on the seat. "Only if it's going to make things worse for you, with Clint—" I says, careful.

"No. He doesn't say much. Our conversation is what you might call limited. And even if he did. But anyway, no. It's as a friend I want you to come. Clint and I—well, we'll manage somehow. It will take time, but in time, something"—she moved her hands circle-wise in the air—"something can be made of our marriage. I've got a start now."

"I'll be there," I says. She smiled again. This time it was a smile took a while coming. Then she switched on the ignition and we rolled around the drive. The grass was short and clean. Up beyond the porch rail there was just one little old woman scrubbing along with a cloth, and she stopped in her work to look over at us and grin a nice toothless grin. The porch rail made shadows that looked like bars flick over the hood of the wagon. We went back on down the road. The frogs was still making that Mardi Gras horn whoop back in the marshes. Then it

slid off the ear and we was back on Dauphin again, and after a spell we was passing the houses in the main body of town. A power of people was out, doing this and that to their lawns. We cut under a big stand of mimosa that reared over the white wall of a corner house, and smoothed along to Government, and pretty shortly we was back alongside the curb in front of Miz Montague's place.

"Saturday night, second week in October," she says. "Goodbye, Carp." She held out her hand and I took it.

"It was a mighty good lunch," I says. "Goodbye." I wanted to say something more, like maybe, "Have yourself a time out of life," but that would of sounded foolish, and besides my throat was all at once too tight to get that much out. So instead I just said, "See you, Ellen," and got out.

She smiled again. I closed the door and she drove away. I watched her go until she turned a corner and was out of sight and seemed like I could see her for a little while after that. Then I swung around and went up the walk and over to the hedges where I'd been working before. I felt a little empty and at the same time whole in myself. The emptiness wasn't a caved-in kind, but like I could feel each bone inside my chest standing separate and solid. The sun was over a little farther in the sky's bigness and the earth was cool-wet under my knees again. I dug into the web of cloth around the azalea roots, packing it down hard, thinking of Ellen and me, of what we had had together that would take a bait of time to know and understand what it had all meant. But it was there. It was fastened down good, way deep in me, something nobody could ever steal or touch or even know about.

That evening, though, I was a pinch restless after supper, so I says so long to Suzy Ellen, who was giving herself a permanent or some such shenanigan in the bathroom, and I whistled up Bo and we got in the car and bumped off down the road. It wasn't night yet, only shortly after seven, but there was that restless nightcoming feel to the air. The moon was making to be orange, a fairly full one, heaping itself up pale now, but you



could tell that when the real dark come it would be a hummer.

Bo, he set on the seat beside me just as proud and forward-straining as if he was a carved wood figure on the front of them old-time sailing ships. There's a ship sunk in the rotting grass and muck out past the causeway to the Spanish Fort looks like that. It's all grayed now and sunned over and thinned to a shell, the masts like tired gray arms in the sun, but the figurehead on her—I walked down squonching in the ooze once and got a real close look—is just like that, a lifting in the air, a thrust and an eagerness like a kind of drinking-in. Bo set that way.

I cut down through Prichard, rattling along, and then left after the railroad tracks along Eight Mile Road and out past the radio transmitter towers that look like Christmas trees, except all the lights are red. They're so big and powerful, it's a constant puzzlement, the weak thin pap that comes out. I'd had me a radio program back a time, and it was smidged-up, beat-down work, setting there playing without anybody watching you but a tired engineer. They'd told me they couldn't pay nothing till they sold it, and I don't reckon they ever would of sold it. Anyway, I just got tired of it and stopped showing up. But them towers, they was fine to look at, reared against the evening sky.

There's a couple of roads slaunch off in different directions out there, with the fields, this time of evening, lying dark between. After a space I pulled off to the side and Bo leaped out after me. I went down through some pokeberry weeds that was all dusted over with the dust raised by the passing cars of the day; they smelled like ginger. I lifted a strand of bobwire and hunched under, and Bo, he come like a black flash. He spread himself running out in the field before me. Over west was a stand of timber I reckoned was second-growth pine, mostly, and I headed for that. Bo would come back to me every once in a while and snuff around just to make sure was I still there, the way a dog will. Then he'd zip out in front again and hell-for-leather, like the whole shooting band of Moseby's Raiders, up toward the pines and oaks charcoaled on the slate-colored sky. The moon was getting firmed out now, orange and clean. Kind they call the hunter's moon.

I skirted around cow pies in the field, and far off I could smell a barn and hear chickens getting fed. When we come to the woods Bo hung back and waited for me; then, when he see I was going in, he went first.

It was a different noise, walking in there, leafy, with the leaves slishing around your shoes and Bo making kind of a leafy-scrape noise ahead. I could hear him snuffling very businesslike, his nostrils going in and out like bellows. After a while, past that first blink of sudden dark, I could see pretty good in there. The moon splashed on the leaves, showing them a blacker green than they are in the daytime. There was a wild natural smell in there that got right into the blood.

I come to a little clearing not much more than twenty yards in, with a stump in the middle of it. I reckon they'd long ago cleared out the first patch of pines and then replanted with these trees that had, in turn, done pretty well for themselves in that mulchy soil. I set on the stump and Bo come over and I took his head in my hands. This was what I'd been teaching him in the woods back of our house, but them woods didn't have much more'n a trace of coon in them, just a passing one, time to time. I could feel this patch had some that was more or less permanent. I'd hunted all this country with my daddy when I was a shaver. Seemed like I recalled this same wood patch from those days. The ground had held the rain because not much sun ever got through where the oaks spraddled under the pines, and in the damp you could smell game trails crossing. You couldn't tell what they was less'n you was a dog yourself, but I figured it was time for Bo to know. He looked up at me. What little light there was made his eyes like green water.

I says, "Coon," soft like that and, "Coon," again. Just that.

I let him go.

He backed off and stood there looking puzzled for a space. I thought he was going to set down, and my belly felt kind of sunk and cold. Then he tipped himself back, the way a horse shies, and he turned, and the second he wheels he's got his head down. Damn, that was fine. I set there with my hands folded between my knees, real quiet, but I could feel the happiness ram up through me. He played around them crossing trails, his nose going.

There wasn't another sound except for a car you could hear a long ways away, buzzing and fading and then gone, leaving a big silence but for Bo's snuffing. Then even that faded away and then there was no noise at all. I set still. A raindrop that had been left over, on some fern, fell to the ground, just a light tick, and I could hear that. I could smell fox, all right, a scult of them around somewheres close. I didn't want Bo to mix with them.

I set and for something to ease the excitement, I sang, but soft and not much on the air, mostly inside me. I sang about John Henry, that steel-driving man. I felt just right for doing it. John Henry's a glad one that the gladness comes through spite of the work and sweat, spite of the driving hammer and the sun and the grief of a tall man going down to death.

When I stopped singing it, them woods was quiet around me as a church. I set most still. I couldn't hear nothing from outside the woods. I got up and walked slow a little way along where Bo had gone. It could be, I says, he's still too young. It could be he would have to work out with a pack a while. It could be he would have to have a regular trainer like I reckon that old nigger Bubba was.

The air was cool as a cave.

When I heard Bo, finally, it was not hearing him at all, more like hearing a horn going halloa, halloa, in the far distance; then I heard another dog, must of been a half-mile away, give answer, sharper and higher, and then the halloa bigged out and got brighter and he must of been veering around to me. It got stronger and fuller on the wet air in them woods, and I picked it up and went fast over to the side it was coming from, through a stack of growed-over stumps with fern behind them most as high as my head. It was like I'd jumped right into the middle of the noise then, and there he was, streaking around past me, and I heard a brushy leap and something shiver in the peak of branches of a pine nine, ten trees past the ones I was standing beside. Bo, he was at the foot of the pine. The light checkered him in patches so's you couldn't of seen him clear anyway. And the beller so round and deep now it was like being inside a steeple, with your ears and guts and heart being shaken out of you and flung out on the wind. Other dogs joined in; I

could hear a whole covey of them shining up to the noise and making their own high, splitting barks, but they'd no tongue like Bo's.

I got over to the pine and I caught him as he slithered down after trying to climb it in one of those terrible leaps. He was hot and wet and slick as grease under me, and his heart was just a-booming; I could feel it throb in his breast, fast, and he was quivering all over. Then I kind of held him, kneeling, best I could, and I looked up in the pine. I could see the green eyes, tiny sparks of fire like on the underside of a log in the dark of night, staring. It was a coon, all right, and I reckon a big one. I hugged Bo, and praised him up good. I got up and hauled him back gentle by the collar, talking steady to him, telling him what he done. I told him I reckoned he would do.

Do! I just reckoned he would.

## CHAPTER XVIII

A COUPLE DAYS LATER, afternoon, I'd gone down to jaw with Gus Helflick at the gas station a spell. In between stretches at the pumps we was shooting a little craps. He kept throwing them naturals, and it was good I didn't have nothing to lose but just the time it took us to play. Some kids rode through the station with narcissus stalks stuck in the rubber grips on the handlebars of their bikes, and I was watching them and thinking how much more natural the narcissus looked than the leather strips the stores sell for wind streamers, and then a squad car pulled in and set there idling. I knowed both the police in it, Burt Molesworth that come from out near Chickasaw, and Tolly Goodin. Burt is wide-set and don't like to move around much, and Tolly is younger and thinner and I reckon does most of the leg-moving when they get a call has to be acted on with any kind of speed or vim. Burt was driving. He leaned out and says, "Hi, Carp."



I says, "Hydy." Then he motions with one fat red hand for me to come over.

I did. Gus had put his dice in his pocket and was going out to the cement island where a Virginia car had just pulled in. Burt looks at me. "Carp, son, we got orders to pick you up."

I thought sure he was funning me.

I says, "Well, if you don't mind my going in the wash-room to throw away my concealed weapons first."

He says, "No jive, son. Get in the back."

I looked past at Tolly. Tolly nodded his head, ducking it up and down quick, embarrassed. I opened the back and got in. Gus was gassing the Virginia car and he lifts a hand at me, so long. We curved around and zoomed out toward town. I reckon Gus figured it was a pleasure trip. I couldn't for my life think of it as anything else myself. We went along, not fast, but not wasting no time either, and I looked at the back of Burt Molesworth's neck where it bulged a trifle over his collar, and wondered in an idlesome way why it is some men take a tan and others just stay a deep brickish red all year. Tolly Goodin inched around and laid an arm on the back of the seat between us, halfway looking at me, and I says, "What is this, Tolly? They want me to be mayor a spell?"

"Don't look like it, but you can never tell," Tolly says.

"Can't tell you, son. Orders," Burt says.

"Aw, come on," I says. "You boys know me and I know you. Hell, far as I can remember I ain't even overparked my car lately."

"Look," Burt says, catching my eye in the rearview mirror. "This ain't no fooling, and it ain't no party. Sure we're friends. But I can't tell you what they want you for. I can tell you it ain't no laughing matter, though."

"Well, damn it all," I says. It felt like water bugs was crawling around in my belly. I guessed the best thing was just to lean back and enjoy the ride and not worry none. I can't say I was able to do that, though.

We cut over to Government and down it. I took a look at Miz Montague's when we passed, and them bushes and hedges looked nice and protected against any frost. Didn't feel to me there'd be a frost for a spell. The air had got soft again, just perfect. I breathed deep, trying to

keep from fidgeting about why they wanted me. Damn, if I was them I'd give a fellow a hint, anyway.

We went on down Government and around the corner downtown, along beside the old graystone courthouse that pieces of keep falling off and could maybe hit innocent citizens on the head like the paper talks about in editorials and that nobody does much about except to get a few scantlings up every so often and have some city workers mix more mortar in her. Burt parks at the curb in the official slot and I get out and we all go in. It's funny how hard you try not to look like you're being taken in. They was real nice about that, even walked a little ahead and let me follow. They was ready to turn if need be, though: they had that kind of alertness about them.

The courthouse is a hell of an old building, with oldness in the smells of it. On the main floor was a candy and cigar stand with a blind old nigger had a wide yellow face setting there; he can make change by the feel of it, fast as a twinkling. The smells of the big main floor was kind of old and weary and cut through by sharp anti-septic. We took one of the rickety elevators that stood open on all four sides. It had a lot of spindly grillwork around it, painted black every year. A city employee, an old stoop-backed man name of Ike, looks up and says, "Carp, they got you for chicken stealing at last?" and kind of whinnies high and absentminded in his nose, and I says, "Not that I know of."

I didn't feel at all good, going up. The elevator stopped at the second floor. The dirty tan of the walls looked lonesome and gloomy and big and stretching a hell of a ways back into the half-dark. This was where the sheriff's deputies chew and spit at the brass goboons, but mostly miss, setting on old wooden chairs that I reckon was there from before the Confederacy. The brown dark floor takes your footfalls and swallows them up and makes everything sound dead and dim as a bluebottle fly buzzing around just before it dies in the autumn, just lackadaisical and no-account. It's a prisoning kind of place even when you don't have to study about prison.

I whistled a little piece going along the hall down to a room at the far end: "Seven footmen all in red to carry my lady to her bed." I don't know what notched that into my head. We went in the room and turned right along

another short narrow hall in there to still another room. The sun was on the windows, but the windows had that stripy sad dusty look they get. I don't reckon there's enough city help to clean them every day. It was like the sun was straining itself to get through. Then I look around and I stop whistling.

John Virgin was setting there in one of the chairs up front.

It was a kind of small courtroom with a raised bench at one end. A man who's a city detective, name of Marvin Heatter, was setting there nigh John with his hat on the back of his head and his eyes almost shut and jiggling some papers on a table in front of him. Wasn't any judge I could see.

And then over at one side, setting so still I hadn't noticed him before, was old man Durbin. He was all gussied up in an old pepper-and-salt coat that matched his pants. First time I ever see him in anything but shirt sleeves.

I stood there and flicked him a look that was a question, and he nodded short, but I couldn't tell what kind of an answer it was meant to be. Then he looks away and studies something on the window sill real hard. I couldn't see nothing on that window sill to study.

"Sit down, Carp," Burt says.

I took a chair that was pulled out nigh the end of the table.

Marvin Heatter, the city detective, ran his thumbs over the papers in front of him, upended them with a dry little riffle and squared them up carefull and says: "Well, I reckon we can get started. Tolly, you tell Murph I'll be little late for the daylight lineup. Just call down the well to him; he's in his office."

"Yessir," Tolly says. He went out, and a minute later I could hear him yelling down out there, his voice sounding lonesome as voices echoing around rocks in a wilderness, only it was just a stairwell past old marble stairs and spindly balustrades. He come back in and shut the door after him.

I was looking at John Virgin. He was looking everywhere but at me. He didn't seem to of changed none. He still had that big prowling hurrying look, and I bet he still went places like a hurricane, even with no place in par-

ticular to go. His brown head with the black slick cap of hair was kind of ducked down, and he looked squinty and serious at the walls, the ceiling, the windows, and the floor at his feet. Seemed like he was took with the same disease old Pete Durbin had, not able to look at me. It didn't worry me with John. With Pete, though, that was another colored horse.

Why, hell, I'd left Pete Durbin not so many hours before. We'd talked a while after work, split a bottle of beer because he couldn't drink no more'n half a bottle; it was sour on his stomach if he did, he said. I'd been telling him about Bo and I'd put out an invitation to go real cooning with us, next month some time, and he'd said be glad to, and meant it. We always got along fine. Now here he was like another person, setting off there with his big twisty eyebrows drawed down over his sharp green eyes and not seeing me. It was like I had died, or he had, and that's a bad way to feel with a friend. I wanted to holler out, "What the hell's wrong with you?"

I didn't, though. There was a something in the room kept me from it.

Marvin Heatter raised his head, his hat tilted way back, and says: "You're Carp Rambo. Residence, Whistler. Mobile County. You work for this man over here. That all correct?"

Old Pete still didn't look at me. Burt and Tolly, they was quiet, just stood there, hands behind their backs, good cops.

"Everything correct so far," I says. It didn't even sound like my voice. It sounded tight and kind of high. The way I felt.

Marvin Heatter nodded. "And you." He turned to John. John come out of his slump and sat up straight. All you could tell from his slick face was that there was a scare behind it. And something besides scare too, something like a swelling that was deep and twisted and bound on having its way. Like he knowed a good deal more than me and what he knowed wasn't going to be any good at all for me.

Marvin Heatter says: "John Wrightson. You move around quite a little, don't you, John?" He says it light and easy.

John didn't answer.



"All right," Heatter says. He put the papers down on the table before him and leaned over toward both of us. "You boys can go ahead and talk to each other if you want, and to us too. Nobody's going to stop you. You don't have to be afraid of that. We know you went in and robbed the Magnolia Bar, three o'clock this morning. We know you planned the robbery a long time. Now we got the money back, and it's a good thing we did, a good thing, you didn't have time to spend it, because that'll make it go a little easier on you. But it'll go a hell of a sight easier if you just talk up now and don't make us waste a lot of the city's time."

He said that all cut and dried and smooth cold too, like it'd all been settled beforehand; like there was naught to do but to do what he says, to speak up now.

Hell's fire. It hit me like a wave hits you unexpected and throws you down when you're surf swimming and the water's high, and just like that I couldn't get my breath for a minute. John Virgin wasn't answering, not saying a thing or doing a thing, just looking away, and now I knowed what was swelling and hid in him that was going to cause me trouble, but not hid from me. But, damn it all, it *couldn't* cause me trouble either, because there set Pete Durbin. And Pete had the truth. I swung my eyes away from John Virgin and looked over at old Pete. He was setting sort of huddled up, with that pepper-and-salt coat collar most up around his ears. He was studying the window sill again, giving it a terrible deep stare. There was a drop of sweat along one side of his face. It crawled down there, and he didn't even raise a hand to wipe it off.

I stood up and didn't even know I was standing. I says, "Listen." I swallowed once because it still didn't sound like me. There was a ball of words in me. I had to get out straight and clear. I says again: "Listen. I ain't seen John Virgin since way last spring. I ain't seen him since then, you understand? That time way back last spring, I didn't like things he was saying. We had an argument. I knocked him ass over ears in a parking lot. And I ain't seen him since till right now! I left the Magnolia this morning—" I swung around to Pete again. He'd been looking at me when I started talking, but now he turned his head away slow. He set there hunched up, staring at

the sill once more. "Hell, Pete," I says, "you know what time it was!" He doesn't move a muscle. Nobody else says anything. I says to Heatter: "It was longabout one thirty, quarter of two, I got in my car. And from there I went straight out to where I live and fooled around a while out in the back, near the woods, with my dog, before I went in to bed. And I didn't get out of that bed till this morning."

I stood there and it was like being hung in space.

It was like I'd been talking to myself, and what I'd said didn't make a particle of sense or difference to nobody but me. Like the room and the dark dusty courthouse halls beyond and the courthouse building and the streets outside in the sun, and the bay, and the docks, and the roads, and the whole earth and all the people in it was deaf and blind and dead to me.

I stood there in that empty space, swinging.

From far below me some place Heatter says, just as level and smooth and cold as before, "Think your wife would remember what time you got home?"

I thought about that, and when I answered it come out kind of flat, sounding like I was talking from a different world. "She was asleep. I wasn't noticing times myself, not very close. But I'd say I was sound in bed, three o'clock, easy."

Marvin Heatter swivels around a little and looks over to John Virgin. John, then, he turns his head to me. We looked at each other for what seemed like an age, them minutes stretching out and the dusty sun rays slanting in weak through the windows and him setting there and yes, even maybe enjoying it, letting it drag out, enjoying what he was going to do—what old Pete Durbin was just going to set there and let him do. Then he shakes his head, just a little. And he smiles. It was the sickest smile I ever see. But it come up under my belly and hit me and caved me in with what it says. What it says not just to me but to Heatter and to Burt and to Tolly. It says, No use, you're guilty right along with me; might as well admit it. But what it says only to me was, *Now I got you, you bastard.*

I kept myself from jumping him. I could feel myself holding back like trying to force a steel door shut.

Pete was setting just exactly the same way he had been, except maybe his head was hanging farther down,

and hell, Heatter and them police, all they could of told from that was that he was sorry for me. Only he was more than sorry. There was something else. I couldn't put my hand on it, couldn't touch it, but it was in the air, something dead and rotten.

I says: "Petel You know me better. You know what I think of John Virgin. You know you didn't see me around the Magnolia no three o'clock this morning. You know if you was robbed it was his idea and his doing and none of mine. You know I ain't like that, Pete. All you got to do is say so."

I leaned there over the table toward him.

I'll never forget leaning there and waiting. He never moved.

Heatter says, "He told us he saw you."

I stared at Durbin. My hands ached where I gripped the edge of the table.

"Pete. For God's sake, look at me. This is a damned lie and you know it."

"Five hundred dollars, and a little over," Heatter says. "That's what we took off John—Virgin, you say his name is? That an alias, Wrightson?"

John says low, "It's a name they call me."

I says: "Pete, listen. Pete; tell them."

Old Pete, he turned around then. He was sweating bad. His cheeks was shiny with it. He looked older'n I ever see him before. Everything give a crazy whirl like it was upside down when he opened his mouth and says: "I did tell them, Carp. It was you. I seen you with John. I was sleeping in the office, and I seen you both when you was running off after you'd got the safe open."

Then he looked away again, back at the sill. What he said had come out just like boulders grinding together. Just that heavy and slow and crumbling and locked together.

He said it so sad, so positive-sure, that for one crazy second there I thought, damn it, he thinks he's telling the truth; he thinks he did see me. Nothing else in the room made any difference but him and me, then.

It didn't seem like what they'd do to me was important at all. The only thing was important was to make him know it wasn't me, and I started to talk, kind of quick and fast and calm, and kept talking a long time. I

could hear my voice beating against the windows like the buzz of a fly trying to get out. But the windows stayed shut. The world in the sun outside looked like a million miles away. It didn't seem like anything you could ever have again just by wishing for.

Pete Durbin, he just set there with his eyes shut.

The cell they put me in, what seemed a long time later but wasn't so long I guess, except time had gone all astray in my head, it wasn't so bad. I reckon you could call it decent treatment. It had a new slop bucket in it and there wasn't nobody else in with me. I set on the edge of the bunk and I looked at a piece of the sun on the floor. I didn't know what they'd done with John Virgin. I got up and started to pace, trying to piece things together like I'd got lost in the biggest woods you ever saw, without a compass, without knowing where the sun was, and the trees so tall and blocking everything out. It was mortal quiet in them woods. Not a squeak of a bird, not a rustle of any living thing. Just my own shadow going back and forth out there past the door, on the other side of those solid bars. My shadow lay there on the floor shaped just like it had been a little while ago when I was standing in the sun outside the gas station with Gus Helflick, shooting craps and watching them kids pedal along on their bikes with the narcissus stalks in the rubber grips of the handlebars.

Time. It's a funny thing how it can do that to you. How it can ball up and double back like a train on a switch-back around a mountain, and make you go over and over what you done and what you think you done. For a time there, in this other strange time, I even wondered *did* I rob Pete's place, in my sleep, and not know it?

There was something quivering in my belly, like I might just start laughing and not be able to stop and would slam up to the bars and start yelling. But I calmed it down by thinking about Bo, and about Suzy Ellen, how she looks when she wakes up and stretches the whole long length of her. And I thought of Ellen, and how her eyes used to burn with wanting, and how they glowed soft and deep even not wanting any more. That did it, and I knowed I hadn't robbed the Magnolia any more'n a rabbit. My shadow looked more solid then, some way.



But the bars was still there, still certain solid, making their own shadow, striping the cement sharp and black in the one piece of light.

Late in the afternoon they brought me dinner. It wasn't much, and all heaped on one plate like a gumbo. The little slice of johnnycake was slopped in with gravy and potatoes. At first I didn't reckon I could eat it, but then I felt hungry and nibbled at it, tasting chancy; then I ate her all down. I set the empty plate on the blanket at the foot of the bunk and propped myself with my back against the wall at the other end. I put my hands together behind my head and looked down at where the the patch of sun was. In a while, I thought, it would be gone. Then they would turn on a light in the hall and the night would start.

I wondered if they'd told Suzy Ellen yet. I didn't know when they were coming to talk to me again. I wouldn't say I'd done it! I knowed that now. I'd never say that. No matter who said I had, no matter if everybody said it, the whole city hollering it out. Because down at the bottom of the heap there was *me*. And somewheres in me, right at the center, was the knowing that they was all wrong. I could see Pete's head, them twisty eyebrows, his green eyes staring at me, his voice like boulders grating. I didn't care. I wasn't going to give in.

I leaned back and tried not to think, and didn't move for a long time. I stayed that way even after I felt somebody stop in front of the door. Then the door was swinging back. There was just a small chunk of real sunshine left on the floor outside. I got up slow. Marvin Heatter and Pete Durbin come in. Pete looked all slumped down and small, but his eyes was different, greener and more alive, and he come to me and held out his hand. I looked down at it. I remembered how it felt hard as a crab's claw. I looked up at Marvin Heater. He was lighting a cigarette. A cop with the keys was out in the hall blocking what light there was.

Marvin shook out the match. "Okay, Carp, you can go. You're free. Mister Durbin's thought it over and he isn't sure it was you he saw any more. He's still sure about the other guy, but not about you."

For a little it didn't mean nothing to me, even the free part of it.

I studied Pete there for a second, and I reckoned he'd gone through something too. If it wasn't nothing else, at least he'd gone through something with the police when he changed his mind, because they wouldn't of liked that. But I thought it was more'n that. Something deeper that he hadn't told. I sure wanted to know what it was. I took his hand, and he gripped mind so tight I could hardly believe he was as old as he looked in that poorish light. We went on out. It was a rare feeling walking out of there.

After a little Pete and me were out on the street. It was all strange out there. I felt like it would take a while to get used to again. The shadows was purple and kind of sunned through, elegant and still, deep under the courthouse wall. People were sauntering by. The courthouse looked the gray color of a pigeon across the road, and the shadows so deep and still. A nigger was leaning against one of the station walls, face-to, with his hands spraddled against the stone, looking graceful as a cat leaning there with his head back, calling up to the blob of a dark face you could see shining in a high-up window, "She say you forgot to pay the gas bill and she want to know when you going to get out." Then he laughed, a laugh happy and easy-gone as a ribbon unwinding through the air, and from inside an answering laugh hooked onto it.

I couldn't laugh that way. Something inside me was froze. I couldn't tell what.

We walked on down together, not saying a word. Some pigeons circled around on the walk at the corner where a bunch of people stood waiting for the light to change. The sky out beyond the river was full of sunset over the Gulf, and you could see still-fishers setting out there on the pilings above the river, patient as little monuments. Finally I says, "What made you even think it *could* of been me, Pete?"

He didn't say a thing. The light went green and we crossed with the crowd.

On the other side he stopped and I stopped and he looked up at me. "All right," he says. "I never thought it was."

"Well, hell's fire—"

"Wait. Damn it, listen to me. It was just John, Carp. But another party got to me early this morning and

wanted me to say it was you along with John. And the way John Virgin feels toward you, that was all right with him. Misery loves company, and I expect John thought he'd like for you to be along where he's going, and—"

"Whoa up," I says.

"Listen now, and then hit me. Or what you will, boy. What you will!"

I says: "What other party got to you that you'd listen to? Who pulls so damned much weight with you that you'd try to get me jailed just because this other party said to?"

"Climb my frame. Go on, beat me up, boy. I deserve it."

His face was up close to mine; his eyes flashed green, but there was edges around them like an old dog's.

"Whoa up," I says again. "Just tell me who this other party was. How big he was that you listened to him and agreed to do me in like he wanted you to. Come on," I says. "Who was he? God?"

Pete's whole face was quivering, and the hand on my arm shook too.

"It's—Clint Hattram owns the building the Magnolia's in. The whole damn' block there, for that matter. His daddy is Senator Buck. And Clint could pull one little string and get the Liquor Commission to snap back my license just like that." His eyes was a couple of furies. "Now you know. Not God, no, but pretty damned near it; and it was laid on the line to me hard and plain, eight o'clock this morning. And if you're wondering how Clint Hattram knowed about me being robbed so fast, well wonder no more. He said it out of his own mouth this morning. He's been watching and waiting for a long spell for something to happen he could pin on you. He's got friends on the police desk. He might even for all I know of got them to tip him off if anything come in on the blotter about my place. Because of you working at my place. He'll do anything in creation he can to fix you. Hell, Carp, he maybe even made it worth John's while to pull the deal and get caught. Maybe said he'd hire a slick lawyer to get him off easy. He hates your guts, Carp."

I felt a sickness in me, everything centering to something ugly and sick. For a second I thought I'd like to set down and vomit. Wasn't any place to set, though, except

the curbstone, and there was too many people around; so I just stood there and felt sick. Old Pete Durbin started telling the whole thing all over again. I could feel the sickness sinking deeper, and I put up my arm, making to hold it off. The skin of my hand and arm smelled of jail. It didn't truly, I suppose; I hadn't been there long enough, but it was going to take a long while to feel clean again. I took my arm down slow and says, "Yes. I see."

Pete was still talking. "All I ever done was pay rent once a month. I didn't know till this morning Hattram had any special interest in my place, or that any man—" He stopped and swallowed, and his eyebrows went up and down with his Adam's apple and he says, "That any man could be so—"

"Yes," I says.

Maybe I sounded bad. Pete squints close at me and then away, still holding my arm tight with one skinny strong crab-clutch of a hand. "Now I don't reckon I'll be in business much longer. He'll get my license, one way or another. Just like he said he would. And it was a fair little business, too. At my age . . ."

His voice was getting smaller and smaller, and it trailed out while he was staring away from me into the blue out past the chewed-up old boards of the pilings along the yellow river. He swiveted his head around again. Squinting at me, he says: "He's smart as turpentine. And full of malice as a fox nipping cattle. And he'll get you, boy. You watch out. You—" He swallowed hard again.

I stood there looking down at him. He was just a little old man, I thought, old and all wore out. Hairy eyebrows, hair twisting out of his ears, green eyes sharp but not very steady right now. I reckon he had thought a soul's lot of the Magnolia Bar.

I says: "I'm glad you changed your mind back again. I guess that took some doing."

His eyes changed, nearly looked away, and then didn't.

"Be a son of a bitch. I'm sorry I didn't change my mind sooner. I'm sorry, boy! But—I was caught by the short hairs. I—"

I went on looking down at him. It was pretty plain now what had happened. I didn't need no diagrams at all. I



wasn't feeling a thing. Nothing but that froze place. It was bigger and solider all the time.

Pete pulls at my arm. "You'll think about it. Sure, you'll think it over, a good deal, and want to climb me. Go ahead, Carp, you got the right. Slap the piss out of me. It's no more'n I deserve."

"No," I says. "I ain't aiming to. You got put in a tight place and I reckon when your tail was in the crack you figured you had to do what you done. The important thing is, you changed your mind. You done that. No, I ain't slapping you, or climbing your frame, now or to-morrow. It ain't that."

"Listen," Pete says. We was still standing there, and knots of people had to break and flow around us. The traffic sounded louder and more hurrying, and there was that feeling of people wanting to get home, looking ahead to their own lighted rooms. And it was like we was no part of that, nor ever would be again. We might of been cast up on a shore and was all alone in the universe.

"I'm worse mad than you, Carp. You might not believe that right now, but it's true. There ain't nothing I can do, and when there ain't nothing a man can do it's just like a bottle full of that gas they use to weld was fixing to blow up in him. You think I want to move bag and baggage back to Birmingham? After putting all I got in this place, after building it up, after—"

I says: "You built a good trade, but don't worry about that until you have to. Maybe he was just bluffing, anyhow. He ain't the only one around can pull strings even so. But whatever happens, I'm mighty glad you changed your mind. Not just because it meant my getting out of that jail cell, neither."

"Yes, but look, Carp. Listen. Damn it, Carp, wouldn't you like to stomp that son of a bitch, all sons of bitches, wouldn't you—"

I says, "Shush." I stood back a little.

"No," Pete says. His coat was wroggled up around his arms and over his chest. He sounded like the wind coming down a chimney, a sighing noise. "Nope. I'm a hammered-down bastard; nothing for me to do. Nothing at all. A false friend too, by all truth." He cocked his head. He was speaking quiet and low. "Carp, I'd of killed anybody done what I just done to you, I was your age."

"Well," I says, "you didn't do it. It was Hattram."

"I'd have killed him too."

"I don't know," I says. And I didn't. "I don't know if that would help anything."

"A false friend," Pete says. "You wouldn't want to go on playing now, after—anyhow for what time there's left . . ."

I says: "You ain't a turncoat. You tried to be, was all. Point is, you ain't. About playing, I'll let you know. Not tonight. I got to be by myself tonight."

He says, "If money'll help, I got a little, I—"

I looked at him.

He says, "No; I didn't think it would." He started to say something else, then closed his mouth; started to put his hand back on my arm, then let it drop limp to his side. He turned away and took a couple of slow steps, stopped, and looked back half over his shoulder. He looked awful old. "See you, boy," he says.

I nodded. "See you, Pete," I says.

I walked away down Government. The last I see of him he's still there watching after me. No, it wasn't I was mad at anybody. Not anybody. I could tell Pete felt a sight better now, and I was glad of that. Not good, he wouldn't ever feel good about it, but he had done all he could; he was telling Hattram to go to hell. And so he felt something like Pete Durbin again.

The sidewalk was busy with people. Most of them looked like they never had a trouble in their lives. I drifted on past the coffee shops and the Admiral Semmes Hotel, where they had convention banners hanging out, and past the *Press-Register* building beyond the Government Street Presbyterian Church all white and huge and bulky in the evening, with that old nigger woman sits on the church steps, sleeps there sometimes, and nobody knows what she waits for, a basket in her arms. I wished, passing by her, I could dump the load of ice I had in me, just leave it in her basket and walk off, being what I had been that morning. But the froze place stayed right where it was; didn't seem like it would ever melt, long's I lived.

## CHAPTER XIX

DAYS SLID TO October just as neat as pecans falling on the ground, and I reckon there's a million, million pecans do that in my town and the countryside around it, every year. Some folks with pecan orchards make a living at it, but hell, with the price what it was that year, didn't seem anybody could scrape more'n a few cents out of the bottom of the barrel. But that don't stop the pecans falling. There's sacks of them on the ground for the taking, and they'll just rot there if you leave them, so the best thing to do is grab yourself a couple croker sacks and get to work. There they laid, waiting to be put in pies and to be hulled and salted down for just good eating, and most every day Bo and me, we brought home a few more sackfuls.

I wasn't sure, now, about singing at the Country Club come that date in October, not since that business with Hattram and old Pete. I was just going along, holding my breath, except of course not truly holding it but waiting to see how I felt from day to day. There was naught in the paper save a little squib about John Wrightson, who'd been arrested for theft. Suzy Ellen knowed I knowed John, and since I worked at the Magnolia—I'd gone right on there, it seemed all right to do—she asked me about it. I says, "What I don't hear sometimes does me a hell of a lot of good." So she didn't say nothing more.

Sometimes for a spell I would catch myself thinking, How could a man be that way? What is it will make him that way? What is it will make him attack like from behind a wall, without ever showing his face?

I figured it was that in Hattram that had got to Ellen, maybe years before, and started making her feel so alone and violent-like. Now she wasn't so bad off any more; she'd found out how to breathe deeper and feel stronger inside herself, and I thought maybe Hattram hated that worse than the idea of her sleeping with me.

Then I'd not think of it for a spell, or wonder what I

was going to do, or if I was going to do anything about anything at all.

There hadn't been a word about Pete's license being taken away.

But I could feel something hanging over me; and Pete could feel it. I even thought that maybe Hattram had decided to play it that way, knowing that having something hanging over you is a lot worse than having it fall.

With me and Pete, them days with the air getting colder at the rim, the sun deeper red, the frost just coming to coat the grasses and the trunks of the mock orange, and the magnolia leaves with a little thin skift—with Pete and me, them fall days, there was a feeling of togetherness in a bad time. He'd stopped badmouthing himself at last, but he never let up on Hattram none. We jawed about it, times, but there wasn't nothing satisfying to do, like hitting a man square with your fist. There wasn't even nothing legal to get prepared, just in case. Lawyers, legal aiders, stuff like those? Well, old Pete went into all that, deep as he dare dabble. He went down to call on some legal type, and the man gives him a look through his spectacles and hems and haws and finally it come out: there wasn't a damned thing he could do. If anything happened to Pete's liquor license that was all there was to it. I guess he liked his lawyering job. I reckon a job like that is a thing you get into the way a mouse gets into a house. A regular common old field mouse, that all at once gets scared to death of the fields outside, where the hawk's and owl's shadow glides across, and figures it's safer to stay in that house for good. He *feels* safe. That makes all the difference to him till the day the trap snaps shut or the broom comes down on his back.

Days went sliding toward October, and me and Bo, we did quite a bit of junketing roundabout the countryside. We even went upcountry one afternoon, back where the old fields are and the big houses high above the fields used to stand, and I reckon even with the brush and the palmettos and the vines kept cleared away by the thousands of head of help they had in them old days, it was lonesome country. It was country in folds of hills, and the hills old as time and big as all getout, with nothing but the shadows of clouds winging over them and skimming the top of a snake fence that drifted off crazy like, now,



through wild vine and thorn and honeysuckle and down into swampy ground. You could stand real still there and feel all the bygone years crowding close around you, with a kind of dead singing in the hauntful air. I was glad to have Bo alongside. There's nothing like a dog to shake off the blues of such a place as upcountry.

You'd climb the fences, or walk along beside them till you got a bearing, and keep climbing gradual, and maybe now and then part a tangle of vines and hear snakes slither away rapid, and you'd poke your head out of the tangle and be looking down at what was left of a walk. The walk had been made of fine brick, but was all wore down now by the sun, the rain, and the many years to a kind of pink shell, dusty at the edges. And you'd walk up it, marveling at the brightness of the green grass between the brickwork, and then suddenly you'd see ahead of you there, like it was rising up out of the ground where it had been buried all this time, the big house. Always the same columns, like in them picture books about Greece, standing still and proud and clear for all their shabbiness and for all the way the roof above them was sagging. Through a side window that had come open in a storm and swung in and was now vine-choked and like being held open by long green arms, you could see inside to the big front hall, where the sun fell on a floor that still had a rubbed, waxed, and polished look under the plaster dust; but everything else moldering and dead and the wallpaper peeling in strips. Some way, it was considerable worse than peering into a tomb. In a tomb you see clean bones. In here it was like the whole past had come and centered itself, and all the violins that had played when the men out of France brought the good orchestras down, was broken and splintered now, and there was just a long thin gasp of sighing and dying in the air. And all so silent; maybe just one bumblebee droning in the clover that grew up purple-knot-headed and high by the window sill. Bo, he'd stand stiff and stretched out with the fur rising along the back of his spine. No telling what he saw or what he smelled. You could tell he didn't like it much, was all.

And then down again in the fields where the cotton had been, but no more, the ground now so thick and mushy under you it seemed like it went down clear black

all the way to China. Once the air over this land shivered with the sound of a conch shell calling the field hands in, sounding out over the downslopes and past the half buried fences. And you'd think, How would you feel if a horn sounded sudden, right now, and the shapes of men got up out of the ground and traipsed slow and silent toward the big house, heading for the well in the still compound out back, where the ruins of the slave quarters stood bleached and splintered in the sun. . . . Then you'd want to get out of there, you'd feel good when the scratch of the starter sounded and the engine caught, and even better when the tangle of high bushes and dying china-berry trees and elms and oaks with roots big as your body was left behind and trim bobwire fences was alongside, and after a while, telephone poles, and far off you could hear a rooster and see wood smoke from a chimney, or a little kid in a red sweater too long for his haunches sucking his thumb in a loblolly mud yard and watching you when you went by like you was the only thing he'd seen that day and he wasn't going to spoil it by moving anything but his eyes.

Days dropped just like them pecans into October, and we made a few of them upcountry trips, but mostly we took it easy in the afternoons, or helped Suzy Ellen beat that fool carpet, flailing it good, so's the strokes sounded, slap, up the road and down again with the echo. Nights, the Magnolia. I'd told Pete I wanted the Saturday night off just in case I made up my mind to go to the Country Club. I guess I'd known all along I would go.

Then it was the second Saturday night in October. I slicked my hair down and brushed up my lumberjack a lick. There was going to be a good moon. About eight I rattled off down the road, my guitar on the seat beside me.

Standing up there in the middle of the floor with the spotlight on me and the cleared space around me and everybody at the tables watching me, and the moon falling through the side windows like an orange plumb line, it seemed I'd worked up to this point through a long scaffolding of time. Even when I was little and swimming in the Chickasabogue, or laying on the bank baretailed, or sliding otterwise down the slick bank to the bronze-

basted water—even then I was working up to this. Not that it was any special great thing in my life, like winning an election. Not that. It was just the Country Club, one of them shindys they have of a Saturday night, with a good deal of drinking going on and a nigger band out of New Orleans dressed in dark wine-colored frock coats up on the platform behind me, the leader an old man named Papa Ledeaux. They was a mopsy-mowing scraping bunch on account of the people here liked them to be kind of Uncle Tom. But that Papa Ledeaux, he could play a lot of cornet when he chose to. No, it wasn't any big event, but just being there, and then feeling in me that I'd been bound for this place, this night, all my life.

I held the guitar, so, and hit a few chords, and started singing "Apples and Peaches and Cherries." You know that one? Well, Josh White's got a record of it, done it some time back, and done well by it. It's a song about a man and a girl and about all men and girls, all the abundance they can have around them, and the bigness of the thing they can have together. It don't say that, not in so many words, but that's what it really says.

I couldn't see too good through the white fire of the spotlight, but I could make out the table where Ellen and Hattram sat. I hadn't talked to Hattram yet, but I thought I mighty well would before much longer. I could see the dark of his head and shoulders, but that was all. I wouldn't even of knowed it was him if I hadn't spotted him before they turned the spotlight on. Alongside him was Ellen. She was wearing a dress I liked, liked on her, anyway: close as an apple peel to the waist and kind of belled out from her hips to around the hem and made of taffeta or silk or something that changed color, black to plum brown, when she moved. She'd come up to me right away when I'd come in. The look on her face, brown skin with them red lips and the eyes dark and clear as water when it pools in a deep bend of a river, and you can look in it and everything's black there but clear, seeing yourself colored by what's still and silenced in the water—from that look in her eyes I see she don't know a thing about what Hattram had tried to do to me. I hadn't hardly thought she did. You could feel her naked under the fine gown, not naked like you see some women so, in your mind, maybe on a summer day with the blood working

warm and lazy in you, but naked like some nice animal moving natural and free in the woods: it was all summed up in that free swinging walk of hers, which she couldn't help any more than breathing. She took my hand and held it, hers brown and firm and no limp loose about it.

"Carp, it's wonderful seeing you. I meant to phone or write to remind you—"

"Well, Ellen," I says, "promise is promise."

We didn't say much more than that. She told me about when she'd like me to go on, and said to sing what I so minded. Now was the time and I was singing. I let that "Apples and Peaches and Cherries" come out slow, and the ice in the highball glasses at all the tables made a little tinkling noise under the guitar and the sound of my voice. I guess she knowed I was doing it for her. I thought again how we'd never be together again, but it wasn't sad, not even empty any more like that day I'd gone back to work at Miz Montague's. I thought of the shadows moving over upcountry, with the sun between. It was something that had happened and that had ended, and there would never be another thing happen just like it. I knowed that, and she knowed it. Maybe I'd come to sing for her on account of her knowing how it was, and how it had been; and there isn't no better way to get a song sounded right than to aim it at somebody you loved once, and still do.

I let the last notes drift off, and the little tightness in my belly that come when I'd first seen Hattram was all gone. I'd had a couple drinks, too. It was good liquor. I didn't much like being there, except for Ellen, but then I didn't reckon I'd likely be there again. I was feeling easier about the whole thing now, feeling like Hattram, over past the edge of white light, just didn't matter any more. We could all go our own ways in peace from this time on. I was sorry for what he'd done, especially to Pete; but in the long run, and if it had to be so, Pete would be better off someplace else and starting up again. There are lots of towns, and the Hattrams don't own them all. So that's the way I felt singing there for all them people to hear, but for only Ellen to listen to. You maybe couldn't call it forgiving, exactly, but that froze place in my belly was gone.



This was to end it all up, to get everything settled and fixed in my mind. From tonight on I would be my own man again, unworrying and free as the October air you could feel at the windows, with a little edge of chill to it, amber-lit by the moon on the oaks brushing the roof eaves above the Club, and green-shining through the panes of glass in the long window.

There was a good body of clapping going on, and I slouched back on my heels and studied what to sing next. I didn't rightly know for a second, then I thought, Why, that's a good one; that's just the one. So I skee-ree-daddled the strings and the handclaps petered out and I chorded a little, leaning over the guitar. Then I looked out past the bright of the spotlight that kind of beat against me and I could see his head, that little sandy fluff of hair drawn back from his forehead, and beside it, hers, with that wealth of black hair glinting in the light-and-dark of the big room. The chill of the air, light as feathers, from the window, touched the back of my neck, and I lifted my head higher toward her, tipping myself around, and started to sing.

I sung right to her. I even took a couple of steps toward her and the spotlight followed me. I didn't want to put her out or embarrass her none, didn't want to cause trouble, but I just had to sing her this one. The last one, it would be. I kept singing and moving closer all through that first chorus, so's at the end of the chorus, where I chorded a little and paused before taking the next one, I was standing right up by the rim of her table. She stayed real still. So did he. They was both inside the circle of the spotlight. The noises of clinking glass and the small buzz of talk wasn't even as loud as it had been, and it hadn't been much noise anyway. I could hear her breathing. In the strong glary light I could see how her face was a little white under the tan, and how there was little lines at the corners of her eyes. I wasn't looking at Hat-tram. Wasn't thinking about him, neither. He only set there.

Looking down at her I could see the white part in her hair that was so exact and kind of pure in the middle of all that gleamy black, and I started in on the second verse of "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair."

I don't guess I could sing like that, every week. Maybe

I could if I really thought hard about my own old woman, Suzy Ellen, if I meditated on the flash of her eyes and her free-sweeping ways and the power of sweetness that's wrapped in a quick and kind of laughing acid way, yes, then I reckon I could sing another song might be even finer. But up to now I hadn't ever sung better than this. I knowed that. There's a mort of satisfaction in singing so, leaning to it the way the sun leans into a red clay bank of a summer noon, and you put all you mean, even some things you didn't know were there till right then, into the words and get them streamed just so into the tune. Then you don't even know you're singing any more, and you're alone. And what you are singing to—whatever it's name may be—is alone with you. Off in a cool place at the earth's end, with enough sun to make life lively, and with no man to say you nay, not ever.

The band was playing again, working on "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," chord-stopping behind the vocal. There was a p.a. microphone down alongside the drummer and his head was down, cheek most touching the hide of the snare, and singing into that microphone with his eyes shut and his breath most held in, making it small and humble as the last peach pit in the world washed up on a heavenly shore. It was a hymn that gets to you and speaks of the world's sorrows. After hearing it you believe you can bear them sorrows better.

I was out in the parking place at the side where I'd left the Chevvie. It wasn't the regular bigger parking lot but where the kitchen help left their jalopies. I could smell, just light, the smell of the paper mill on a little wind from the north. Through the Club window back there, yellow and rose, I could see the bent-over head of the drummer. I could hear him sing: "Just a closer walk with Thee—grant it, Jesus, is my plea." I'd heard that same band do it before. After this drummer had sung, Papa Ledeaux, he'd play with a mute in, soft like to break you in two, reverent as heads of willow trees beside still waters. They meant it. This wasn't no Uncle Tom, not this one. It was the way they felt.

I unslung the guitar and put it in the car. The moon showed clear on the parking strip. Sudden, after Papa's horn chorus, come a ripple of drums and they settled.

down in that old levee style. It was like church's out, sun's up, looka them damn' lambs a-jumpin'.

I walked around the other side the car. I could see a deal of other houses from there, scattered around the Country Club. They was mostly lit up, and big. Not big like the upcountry places; you couldn't feel these could ever be that deserted, with the sun falling to a ballroom floor like it didn't belong. But I expect them big old up-country places looked like these once, except more graceful and ample and like life would keep going on without change under the usual suns and moons, without ever a stop, just age after age of sleeping and eating and breeding and dying, and the house always there like open arms.

That was a funny thought to have. But I was feeling a damned funny way. I didn't want to see Ellen, or anybody right then. I thought to myself: I'll go home and scoop up Bo and we'll drive down to the old sawmill road, down there under Telegraph, where she's bumpy and bad but where there's a marsh with stands of willows and frogs. We maybe can jump another coon.

I trod on the starter. The engine was going when one of the chefs from the kitchen come out with a quart jar in his fist and his face looking beat-up and like he'd cooked it by mistake instead of the ham. I bet she was hot in that kitchen; he looked a big wet bruise. He see me, or heard the car, and come over.

"Hey there, Mister Rambo. How come you leaving so early?"

"I'm hired help and I done my stint and it's time to go home," I said. "What's that besides shinny in that jar?"

"Damn it, I hope nothing else! Want a swallow?"

I says, "I might be capable of it." He handed her over and I rocked her back. It was pretty fair shinny. Shinny ain't like any other liquor. After swallowing you hold your breath and cross a gulch between backing up and spraying and staying with her and not spraying. But the gulch wasn't so terrible wide, this particular shinny.

The moon shone smart on the hood of the Chevvie, and back yonder in the clubhouse the band was sloshing away, everybody together.

He says: "Dollar and a half, she's yours, Mister Rambo.

I stewed a whole new batch. Invented me a way to make it age faster."

"It's going to make a whole passel of people age faster, itself," I says. I held the jar in on hand, eyeing her. "All right, sold." I dug down in my side lumberjack pocket and got a dollar and a half and give it to him.

He grins and says: "You 'member where you got it. Tell you' best friends. Night, Mister Rambo."

I says, "Good night, happy times." I set there with the shinny in my hands, not moving yet. I tipped her back a couple times. Now the band was Uncle Tomming it again for all they was worth, playing some fool thing went like, "Will you love me tomorrow if I let you love me tonight"—I don't know, like a waltz. It was a friendly night, though. I was getting ready to leave, all in my own good time. I sloshed back the quart jar again, and nigh hit a snag because I forgot the breath holding at the gulch, and just slid over her in time. I looked out over the long stretch of grass. There was a few couples ambling around out there, arms around each other. There's something mighty inviting about a golf course. That good bent grass is so soft and thoughtful.

I took another drink. I wasn't feeling her much. I reckoned I'd best shut up shop pretty shortly and stay vacationed from her a while, though. I can drink a bait of liquor, but ain't no man can walk around looking like himself for long with a hide full of shinny.

But I didn't go, I just set there, and things come floating in my head. Like, I was wondering how it would be to be one of the people latched to the Country Club by the way they got born, and to all the Mardi Gras floats, and the Athelstan Club downtown, and making out that it's life, keeping up a buzzsaw of noise and parties all the time. But in between there must be times they wonder what the hell the stars are there for. They must even think, There must be ways to hunt without having a lodge for it and nineteen niggers to handle the dogs and a gun that cost a thousand dollars but you can't shoot so good. They must wake up sometimes in between dark and daylight and mull over the lives in them wormy shacks held together with red and yellow tin signs, the tin all rusted, over on Davis Avenue, and wonder how it is a nigger laughs so free. I don't know, maybe they didn't



think that way. But if I was them, I would, and I wouldn't figure the Junior League or the Rights of the Brethren Colored Societies was going to fix everything up nice and tidy, neither. Or maybe, again, I would. Maybe I'd go a little blind like a horse with blinkers on, so's after a while he don't even know he's looking straight ahead and missing a lot of green grass to the sides of the road.

All them things I thought, with the shinny jar cupped there warm in my hands, and then I heard aside me, "Like to see you a little while."

Something jumped inside me but I didn't even turn my head. I knowed then what I'd been waiting for. But even then I thought, No, I should of gone on. I'd of been most home now, aiming for Bo, and we could of gone off to the marsh and away from everything.

"You're looking at me, seems," I says.

"Yes, but I want to see you good. Want to talk to you."

He was leaning close.

I reached across and twisted the handle of the door on his side.

"Get in, then, Clint," I says, "before the night damp gets to you. I don't mind talking, or whatever you've a mind for. I don't mind in the least."

## CHAPTER XX

No, I DIDN'T mind. That was God's own truth.

Even since that first day last spring, and maybe a year of Sundays before that, this moment right now had been waiting to happen. Just like the singing inside had been a thing built up to by everything I'd been or done all my life long. Now it was happening, and I was ready for it, whatever it would turn out to be.

I reckon some people would figure Hattram had a hard score to settle with me, seeing as I'd slept with his wife

and all. If anybody else slept with Suzy Ellen I guess I'd know what to do, and take joy in the doing of it, too. But Hattram wasn't me, and that was the whole trouble. Except for us both belonging to the same race of animals and wearing pants and shoes, didn't look to me like we had much of anything else in common. Nothing important, leastways.

That made it hard for me to figure the rights and the wrongs of it. All I was sure of was this: I wasn't sorry, or mean-feeling, or ashamed of anything I'd done, and I wasn't about to say so, neither. Still and all, while I waited to see would he get in the car, or wouldn't he, I couldn't help a feeling rip through me like the shiver you get when the sky gets that sulphurous look to it and something in the dead air whispers *hurricane*.

He got in the car and shut the door, smack, after him, and I set the jar of shinny down careful on the floorboards, taking care to tighten the cap on her, and then we was moving off down the road. The moon was a big swag of orange, riding coppery and clear as a round mirror over the fields. Hattram set forward with his hands clenched tight at his sides.

We passed his house, all lit up fine and grand, with the mimosa dark in the curve of the drive and the kennels looking silvery ghostly in the moonlight, everything icy-bronze clear.

Then we come out on Old Shell, and there was some traffic but not a lot. I could see the fair blondish hairs on the backs of his hands when the light slipped over them. My own hands on the wheel felt loose, but good and steady and ready to tauten if need be. I felt like humming, so I did, but real soft and light.

We eased along down Old Shell—that fool Chevrolet was running pretty good now—and started the run down into town. I got to thinking what a good town it was; couldn't ask for a better. I like it winter and summer, cold and wet or stinking hot—and it can get that way—or like now, in the cool core of midnight when the oldness of it speaks low to you. Not sad, but low and thoughtful. A bus went around us, and on the side of the bus was a sign advertising the Bellingrath Gardens out near Theodore, and I thought how fine it would be to go out there some day and look at the flowers. Take Bo and

Suzy Ellen out there and just stand and take in all them flowers they got out there.

Farther on down the road the houses got closer together. Some of them was lit up inside and you could see people setting around, maybe listening to the radio or reading a paper or just jawing together. I wondered did those people think like me or feel like me, have troubles and happinesses like me? But already they was gone, and I wouldn't ever know.

Then we come out on Broad and waited for the green arrow to turn left onto Government. There's more traffic there, the cars making a sound like tearing soft cloth and the boughs of the trees dipping close and almost arching together over the road. The arrow greened and I made the turn.

A minute later I took in a mite of breath—I was breathing shallow—and says, "You just aim to ride, or did you truly want to see me?"

"I wanted to see you," he says.

"Fine," I says. "But you been seeing me for about eight miles now, and if you're ready to talk, now's a pleasing time as any."

"No," he says. "Not yet."

"Suit yourself," I says.

Now we're all the way past the tunnel, and I turned left on Royal and then right again and headed riverward. That's the part of town feels oldest to me, even though none of it's older'n any other part. There are old ramshackle warehouses down there with draggeldy old posters hanging from them in long scrappy strips of faded reds and tired greens, and the streets are empty and mournful and most deserted save for a car parked here and there and a quick-strolling nigger coming out of the shadows. In the old days that part of town was knowed as Spanish Alley, and what they used to do was, they'd kill somebody in one of the dives there and drop him through a privy hole. The privies was all out over the water, and the body would float out down the bay and the world would be shut of it, and it of the world, and no man ever the wiser. That was in the long-gone time when the town was Spanish for a while. Hell, the town's been everything, one time or another: Spanish, French,

British, Confederate, U.S., and for all I know a passel of other things besides.

Them old warehousing buildings, they lean over high above the streets and seem so hot and dry and deserted, and that in the cool light of a winter day too—just tired, and emptied out. Even though they're used, they seem empty. There was a few fleabitten bars down in the nigger section at one end, and they shed a yellowy light to the paving and the niggers was hanging around the entrance, their faces looking like brown and black olive oil and only their eyes lit up and living, and talking that slow talk when you idled past—talk that ain't like any other, that says more between the words than any other.

There was the stink of the river along there, and a smell of traffic fumes left over from the busy Saturday night. Not much traffic now, just the red eyes of a few cars' taillights way up ahead, winking in the dark like they had some kind of shared secret. I reckon this country's got a lot of towns with that late-feeling, secret-feeling to them. Maybe the stones of the street you're walking or driving over don't ever sleep, but just stay awake and remember.

The next street I turned down was close as you could get to the riverside. It was there ahead of us, past the gray, chewed-up-looking wood of the walkway alongside it, inching along, dark brown as coffee with plenty of chicory and just a little milk in it, New Orleans style.

I skinned the car slow toward the curb, and the shadows swallowed us most up but for one neon sign in a window that fell blue over part of the car hood. Hat-tram's face looked pale blue, pale as his eyes. I cut the engine.

I leaned back and folded my arms.

"All right," I says. "Let's have it."

He took a breath. Then: "I tried to get you."

"I know," I says. "But it didn't work."

"No," he says, "it didn't. Not that time."

"I notice the Magnolia's still doing business," I says. "How come you ain't cracked down on her?"

"I could," he says. "I could, all right."

"Wouldn't do no good," I says. "I'd just go right on living. And Pete, he's a pretty good old man."

He looked at me full in the eye for the first time then,



and in a flash I wondered was he so drunk he didn't show it. But no, it wasn't anything like whisky made his eyes glitter so.

"Damn it—" He dragged it out slow, almost choking over it. "You can sit there and be just as calm and—" And he twists away like his stomach hurt him. He sat kind of bent over and straining inside. Then he grits out: "You want my wife? You want to marry her so you can sleep with her any time you feel like? Do you?"

"Hell, no," I says. "So happens I'm already hitched up, case you didn't know or don't remember."

"But you love her. You're in love with her, aren't you." It wasn't no question.

"Sure I love her. I love my own wife, too."

"Bastard," he says, forced out low and hoarse.

"Now look," I says. "Ellen and me, we ain't seeing each other any more. Tonight was the last of it. That's why I sung to her the way I did. That was goodbye."

"Think that makes it any better? You think I'll ever forget how you looked at her—how she looked at you—everybody watching?"

Well, I'd overlooked that part of it. What galled him wasn't so much me and Ellen as anybody else knowing about me and Ellen. The poor shriveled-up little cuss. I bent down and hauled up the jar of shin and unscrewed the top. "Here," I says, holding it out to him. "Have some."

Didn't seem like he even heard me.

"Good orderly drink, shin," I says. "Buck-and-a-half breed, too." But he still didn't make a move or answer, so I tipped her back and took a swallow myself. She hadn't aged none since I bought her; in truth, seemed like she'd gotten younger. She melted in easy with the rest, though. I screwed the top back on and set her back down on the floor.

"All my life," he says after a minute, so quiet and bitter-like it was as if he was talking to himself. "All my damn life."

"All your life, what?" I says.

He turns slow and looks at me again. His eyes was half shut. They would of looked almost sleepy if it wasn't for the hating in them—that and something else. Then it

went through me like a knife: he was crying. Not free and open crying, but all held in and back behind a stiff face.

"You wouldn't understand," he says, and his voice is as stiff as his face, but you could almost hear the crying under it. "You white-trash son of a bitch, you couldn't understand—" Then he leans forward and mutters something that sounds like "kill you" and his hand comes up and I see it shining there, glinting blue-black as coal, a neat little automatic.

A splinter of ice went through me hard, driving right through my belly, and I seemed bigger than I'd ever been before, and he seemed bigger too, and the whole night around us was huge and waiting. Somebody was walking somewhere down the street, the feet going crunch and crunch along a gravel space between sidewalks and then a regular hard stride, clipped, on the sidewalk, getting fainter and fainter.

I says, "You think that's going to do any good?"

In the snitch of time it took him to answer, near a thousand thoughts and pictures chased through my head: Suzy Ellen, you feed Bo regular, take him cooning, get yourself another man—better go down Chickasabogue way to do it, though; Ellen, don't let this fret you too much; you got a good life to live, with or without this crazy bastard setting alongside of me; damn, there's a whole lot of living I'd like to do yet, songs to sing and work to do, love to make and things to see and touch and smell, rain, sun, daytime and night—

"... makes no difference," he was saying, still all tensed and whispery in the back of his throat. "... doesn't matter any more."

I didn't reckon the worst shot in the nation could miss, this close. And it takes just a hair's motion to squeeze that trigger back, them mean shiny little animals. Tell you, I was sweating, and wasn't only shin.

"Damn it, man," I says, louder'n I meant to, I guess. "What the hell happened to you, anyhow? Somebody snitch your brand-new football when you was six, going on seven?"

There was a long minute of quiet so deep you could hear it pound.

Ahead was the river, slashed with a broad band of

moonlight, but all around us was thick shadows, just smudged by that pale blue neon.

Then something happened. I don't know how to say it, I might could sing it some day, but there come a difference. You could tell. Like something in the air went snap, real soft, way it does come spring if you listen close when the buds unfurl from the long tightness of winter cold, and start to come alive again.

He kind of slumps, not fast but gradual, and all on a sigh he says, "No." He says it soft, but like a stone had rolled off his chest. "It wasn't a football. And I was ten. I know because it was my birthday. Damn' black-haired bitch . . ."

There was another long quiet. For a second I thought, hell, he *is* crazy. I never moved a stroke.

"Just up and left," he says, so soft and bitter I could just about hear him. "Never even said goodbye. Hell, I hated her. Almost as much as I loved her. But not right away; not until later. At the time, when my daddy told me what she'd done, I cried. He just stood there and told me, cold as ice. Your mother's run off to live with another man. Just like that. And I went down on my knees and cried. And then . . . you know what he did then, my daddy?" He tried to take a deep breath, but it got stuck halfway and he had to swallow. But when he went on his voice was still soft and slow: "My daddy picked me up off the floor . . . and he beat me. Beat me so hard I couldn't even scream. I kept thinking it couldn't be happening, it just couldn't; because it was my birthday."

Suddenly I got a picture of an old underground river had sunk out of sight, leaving a scattering of brush and a choked dustiness in the bed where it was, and then for years, maybe, goes through a lot of water levels, seeking its way out, and then one day she surfaces and comes out in a spate, rolling out fast to make up for all that lost underground time. The way he was talking made me think of that.

"What the hell he want to do a thing like that for?" I asked, but quiet and slow, just like him.

"To teach me a lesson. A lesson he said he hoped I'd never forget. I never did."

"Lesson?"

"Not to trust a damn soul but yourself. And if you want

to hang onto what's yours, to fight the other fellow off. He was right. It was a good lesson. I never forgot."

The gun shifted in his hand and he was dead still.

"Now look—" I said, but he went on like he hadn't heard:

"Black hair, just like Ellen's. Same eyes, same skin. Why I married her, I reckon. And why I've been waiting for something like this to happen. I knew. All along, I knew."

"Listen," I said, "your daddy never meant for you to pull a gun on anybody. That's not what he did."

He laughed, just once and hard. "Didn't have to. My daddy was Senator Buck, remember. She came back, all right. Next day. Nobody ever found out about it. And neither of them ever mentioned it right up to the day she died, a few years later. And in those years I got to hate her. *I was glad when she died.*"

He passed his free hand over his face, like he was almost too tired to hold his head up. Then the hand dropped and he turned and looked at me, though I got the feeling his eyes wasn't focused right on mine.

"Always knew something like this would happen. First time I saw you, I hated your guts. All you had to do was take her, wasn't it. Damn you—" and the gun came up a little.

"Look," I said, and took a quick breath. I knowed that what would happen, to me and to him too, hung on what I said right now, this mortal instant of time. "What happened in between? From the time you was ten and the day I come around last spring? Seems to me your learned your lesson too good, maybe. Hell, everybody's got something bad to look back on. Thing is, a person grows up. And you don't hang onto what you got by fighting the other fellow off. I come to your place to get me a hound and for no other earthly reason. I didn't come for your wife. And I didn't take her away from you, neither. Because you never had her. Maybe you did once, but not when I met her. You'd lost her, and all on your own. Because you hadn't give her what she needed. I'm not talking about sleeping with her; that ain't important, no more important than a fine house and servants and dogs and cars and all. Something else, goes deeper than any of



that. Something you forgot how to give, you were so busy being biggity and holding on tight and looking for thieves."

He made a stirring motion, but I held up my hand to keep him shut. I was wound up and not near finished, and I wanted to get it all said now, and out in the open because I knewed it for the truth, and the truth wants saying, times, for no other reason than its own sake.

"You thought it was special hard taking any crap from me," I says, "because I was white trash and no account, didn't hardly have a pot to pee in, way you looked at it. But the right of it was the other way around. I had more than you ever had. I got the better of you right this minute, for all that shooting iron there in your hand. And I ain't bragging none, neither, because hell knows even them blind beggars hangs around Royal, *they* got more'n you. Any man does who don't have to hang on for dear life and like to strangle those they live with and be all the time afraid they'll get robbed. Hell, you can't keep a thing by clutching tight to it. Your daddy was dead wrong, Clint; wrong's a man can be. There ain't no way you can have a thing in this world except you let go and keep your hands to your sides, not touching it. If you do that and still got it, why, then it's yours for good. And you can still do that. It ain't too late. You want to, you can be what you want to be and have what you want to have and not hurt anybody else and not be afraid of a living thing."

I couldn't think of much else to say. I was breathing kind of hard.

"Now," I says, slower and more calm, "you can shoot a hole through me with that thing if you're so minded, but you do that, you'll never have a chance to find out was I right or was I just making my jaws work."

He just set there. He wasn't looking at me, wasn't looking at anything. Seemed like all the tuck was out of him.

I reached over and lifted that automatic out of his hand. He didn't give me no argument, just let me take it. It was a wicked, blunt-nosed little bugger, and the safety was off, sure enough. I skidded her in my pocket and felt the sweat roll down my sides. Then I reached for the shin and took a good long pull. I held the jar to Hattram, but

he shook his head no, absent-like, and then fetched a long-drawn-out sigh. That was all.

All the while I'd been talking I could hear little ticking noises in the Chevvie, the engine cooling off, the metal dwindling down to normal after the run she'd had. Now it was most quiet. We hadn't been there long, but in another way we'd been there for an age of years. I switched on the ignition and kicked her up.

"Where to?" I says. "You want to go back to the Club or home or where?"

"The Club," he says, only he just whispered it.

"Good," I says. "Ellen's likely wondering where you got to, maybe worrying some."

"Not about me," he says. His voice is dull and flat, but not tensed up or crying-like any more.

"You could get her to worry about you," I says. "You could do that."

We start moving, away from the river and the old warehouses, away from the deep shadows. After a block or so he kind of half looks at me and says, "Maybe. I don't know."

"Sure you could," I says, and I wondered if he really could. It would be a thing worth any man's trying for, though. That was for certain sure.

We rolled along back through town, my town, and his too, down the sleepy streets past the balustrades of old lacy ironwork on Conti, then along Broad, and pretty soon we was to Old Shell again, with the trees flittering their shadows over the hood in the moonlight.

Then the rise of the hill and up ahead, at the end of the long drive, the lights of the Club and the music coming faint and sparse but connecting up and getting louder as we neared. The air had that tang to it made you feel like drinking it deep to the lung.

We stopped near the walk up to the main entrance. For a minute we just set there. I kept the engine running.

"You want your gun?" I says.

He shakes his head. "No," he says. "You keep it." Then he gets out. I thought he was just going to go off without another word, but he turns and pokes his head in the window. "All right, Carp," he says. "It's all right."

I didn't know how I'd best answer that, so I just nodded, kind of.

Then he starts off up the walk toward the Club, going slow and draggy. I watched him go, and my head was full of questions, questions I'd maybe never know the answers to. But just when he got to the steps leading up to the gallery—could be it was some trick of the light, but he seemed to answer some of them questions for me. From where I was, looked like he straightened up firmer and pulled his head up and started up them steps with his feet solid on the treads. The band was playing "The Saints Go Marching," a fine swinging tune to put starch in you. Well, Hattram wasn't no saint, no more'n me, but if he was even studying about marching, why, that was something solid to build on. That was fine.

Other hand, you can't tell with people. Might be he'd wake up tomorrow meaner'n he'd ever been and still convinced in his own mind he was the thirteenth apostle. I hoped not, for Ellen's sake. And partly, sure, in a funny but true way, I hoped it for his own.

Best I go. I put the car in gear and slid on down the drive. The air was quieter the farther I got from the Club.

It moved through me, something my daddy said once. *"Just you listen. The only common enemy any man's ever got is old man Death."*

Heyo—ahead of me in the night I could feel my own house waiting, and Suzy Ellen in it, and Bo. Then past them all, our town with the blind that come out on Fridays to look for something that'll keep them alive, with maybe a sprinkling of happiness through their days. And then, on past them all, the other natural beggars and seekers and askers in the world, reaching out with their hands to the sky.

Who's to say what they might could find? I reckon no man ever knows till his own bones mix with the ground to grow a grace of roses. So I just headed easy along, toward home.

THE END







**I'M IN TROUBLE — WITH A WOMAN**

I set out that morning to buy a hound dog for my wife, Suzy. I got the dog, all right, and a beautiful woman to boot.

Her name was Ellen — and she was married to the most powerful man in town. I tried to stay away from her, but it was no good. I found I wanted her no matter what it cost. Even if it cost me my marriage and my life . . .

**"A story of sudden emotions, unashamed."**

*Virginia Kirkus Review*

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